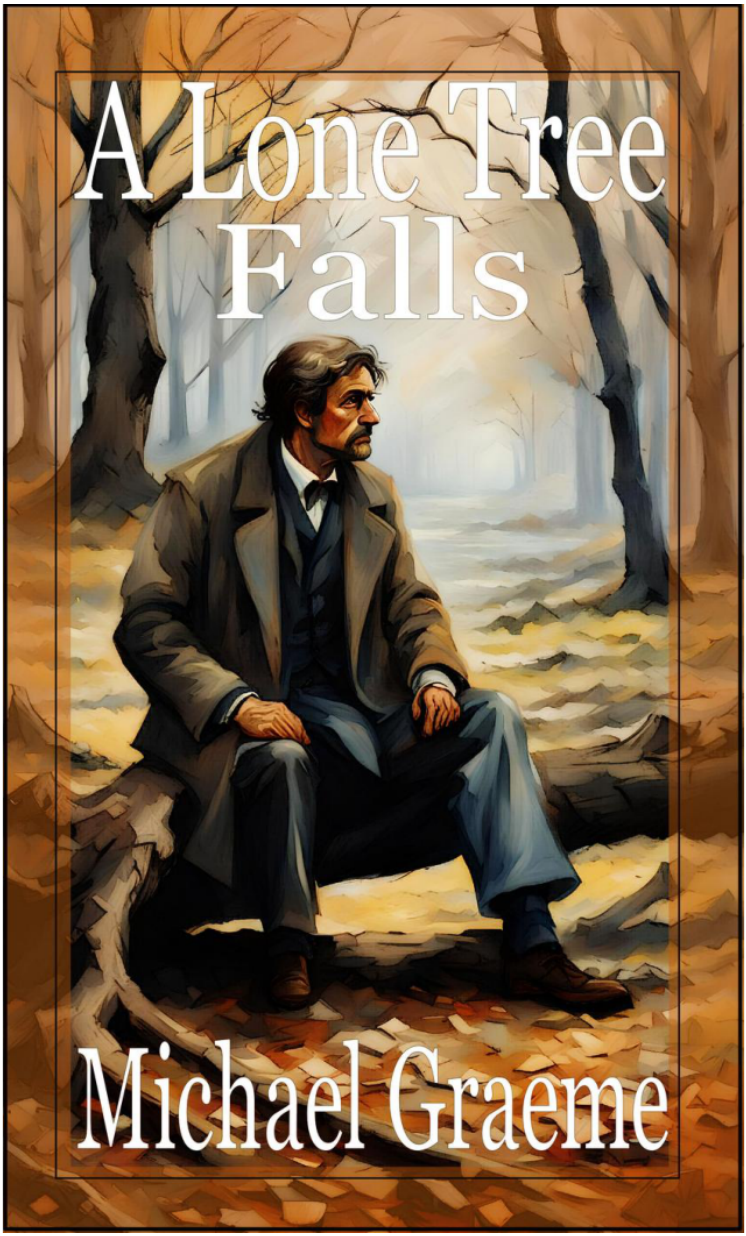
A Lone Tree Falls
Michael Graeme

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by

Michael Graeme

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Epilogue

Chapter One

Marsh Avenue, Marsden

In which, we remember Marsden as it was in our boyhood, and contrast that with its present hollowed out distress. We meet our neighbour, a pebble-eyed, scar-faced man who plays loud music at all hours. And we pose the question, what are we doing back here?

This is the last garden in Marsh Avenue with a privet hedge, the last with a piece of lawn at the front, and flowering borders. There were once pretty gardens along the whole length of the avenue. You could see the seasons change through the cherries in early spring, the yellow laburnum tassels in late May, and the deep greens of high summer. Of course, there were one or two properties where it had been let go, and it was said to speak volumes about the occupants, that they operated on a lower moral plane, for such was the way of respectable suburbia in those days. The rest held the centre as best they could, and in the only way they knew how. Now the centre has burst. It's all concrete, cracked pavers, and white vans.

It has gone to hell.

Except for this, my father's house. It's hanging on, but is being made to look ridiculous in its prettiness.

There were neighbours here too: Mr. Williams, a retired gentleman who, in my memory at least, always wore a white jacket. Sometimes he'd have dungarees underneath, if he was repairing bicycles. He liked old maps and cameras. Weekends would see him in a Trilby hat and a dickie-bow, an old Voigtländer camera over his shoulder, setting out for Durleston Wood, and whatever he used to photograph there. He smelled of pipe tobacco, and mushrooms. His wife, a portly dame of indeterminate shape would arrive unannounced to camp my mother, and help with the housework. Nowadays, this would be seen as an intrusion. Back then it was weighed more kindly, as a form of solidarity.

Then there was Mr Simpson, on the other side. His back garden had gone wild. Indeed, it was a profusion of blackberries and rhubarb, for which neither he nor his neighbours ever went short. But he kept his front manicured. He had some magnificent cherry trees to mark the apexes of a triangle of lawn. When they blossomed, they were the pride, and the envy of the

neighbourhood. The lawn has gone now, and the trees were felled, the roots grubbed up to make way for a pick-up truck. Loud music pours from that house all day now, and late into the night.

The occupant is a scar-faced man, who wears camo. He keeps a pair of barking bull-lurchers which, the story goes, he trains to kill badgers and foxes, up on the moors. I don't know if this is true, but he has dead eyes, like black pebbles. I have studied his sort, and can easily imagine it is so. When we are ruled in a less ambiguously totalitarian manner, when everything else, including the pretence, has fallen, one of his kind will be appointed the local chief of police, pulling out the fingernails of dissenters, until they scream out their love for Big Brother. I have never spoken to him, so cannot call him a neighbour. His music is unmusical, consisting at my end purely of beats. It jams what's left of my brain, so I cannot write when I am there.

Let me say I did not intend coming back to Marsden, but I don't regret it now, nor the circumstance that forced me. It granted time to see my father out with grace and honour. It eased his mind, thinking there would be someone around to keep on top of the garden, keep it respectable, while he got back on his feet - this being in the manner of his generation who took pains to ease the minds of passers-by, that here at least, they were safe from assault and robbery. Because everything looked nice.

"Remember to sharpen the edging shears, before you clip round."

"Yes, Dad."

"The India Stone's in the shed. I showed you how. Remember?"

I do remember. I was fourteen when we had that conversation. How long ago? Forty years, is it? Except it was Mr Williams who showed me how to sharpen things with an India Stone. It was also *his* India Stone I was always borrowing, because my dad had worn ours concave.

I am on the cusp of old age myself now, or late middle, or whatever they call it, but in my father's eyes I was always a lad. I didn't mind that. He meant well, even when he was wrong, which, looking back, was often. It's an important step along the path, I think, realizing your father could be wrong, and loving him all the more for the realization.

But he never did get back on his feet. I think he knew he would not. I think he knew I knew, too, but we pretended it was not the

case, that he would soon be right as rain.

He'd gone a little deaf towards the end, so he wasn't as disturbed by the noise from next door as I am, or if he was, he never said. He never complained about anything, even when he had much to complain about, like how the doctor hadn't a clue what was wrong with him, until it was too late. Then his only apology was: *well, Mr Swift, you've had a good innings.*

The night he died, there was heavy metal coming through the walls, as I sat with him. I'd not the courage to go round and tell the scar-faced man there was this old gentleman, my father, with a magnificent story of life behind him, a man blessed by his obscurity and his inoffensiveness, dying on the other side of the wall, and could you not for once turn the music down, let him pass into the next world in peace, and not be chased there by Banshees?

Funny, the things you feel ashamed about.

He was a craftsman, my father, worked magic on a lathe, making tools, and far away fortunes for the oil and gas industry, yet relatively little for himself. But then such is the way of the world of work. Mr. Williams was a labourer at the rubber works, in the days when Middleton could boast any manufacturing industry at all. Mr. Simpson was a retired collier, with emphysema. He hid the black stuff he coughed up in a clean white handkerchief, which he kept folded neatly in his pocket for that purpose. If there could be any dignity at all, with advanced emphysema, he tried to maintain it. All were gentlemen, their wives, decent, resilient women, and their solidarity was like glue to us, throughout the leaner years of growing up.

Oh,... you get the picture. Things are not the same now. And perhaps there has always been this sense of decline, certainly in the north of my country, though accelerating since the Thatcher years. And lately it has taken on a more unabashed presence, smelling of a thing more brazenly foul. And it's our fault, because we grew fat and stupid. We looked away, and we let it happen.

The obvious thing to do, now my father has gone, is to sell the house, but a part of me is saying that would be to close the door on what I still believe to be a thing worth rescuing. If only I could define the shape of it. But I cannot stay here either, because of the insult of that music. And the loss of gentleness, and the richness of colour in Marsh Avenue is full of hurt for me. All I do when I'm here is scroll my phone for crass novelty, and wait for a change in

tempo in the music bleeding through the walls.

It's not like I don't have a life elsewhere, though all that consists of these days is a canal boat - by way of investment, and temporary lodgings. I was, by degrees, moving it further north, for lack of something else to do. I presume it's still where I moored it, though I'm not sure where that is, now, exactly, having left it in something of a hurry and in the middle of the night, upon receiving news of my father's decline. Yet, I was clearly edging closer to my roots. For what purpose it is hard to say. It was nothing rational for sure, but then we moderns invest too much in that word: rational. We take it to mean only that which is logical. And though there is nothing logical in threading a tin boat along the wriggle-some canal system of England, there had, for a time, seemed something meaningful in it.

I shall dwell on why I thought so, and hopefully explain later.

Chapter Two

In Durleston Wood

In which we visit the neighbouring, and once prosperous, market town of Middleton. There, we take in its present state of distress, then to Durleston Wood to investigate the extent of the disappearing greenbelt. We discover our lone beech tree barely hanging on, and apparently held upright only by witchcraft. And we discover a cipher. But can we decode it? And if we could, would it actually tell us anything interesting, or is everything we make a puzzle of merely bullshit?

The village of Marsden grew up between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, around a spinning mill, a cluster of coal mines, and a railway station. All had gone by the mid twentieth. Its nearest neighbour, Middleton, a market town of middling size, still has a thriving market. It sells mostly junk, vegetables and cheap clothing. It has a town hall, and a police station, but little else. There is extensive warehousing to the north, but no industry. "Rust belt", is the term used in the national media, but they know nothing about it, since they never leave London, and our local presses consist of nothing but web-scraped, juddering nonsense, and click-baity 'moms' who have discovered weird things you can do with common household items.

The high-street is stripped out, consists now solely of pop-up coffee shops, charity shops and food-banks for the starving, of whom there are now many - even those working three jobs. The council do not know what to do about it, indeed are so strapped for funds there are rumours they will be removing bulbs from alternate street-lamps, and switching them off altogether at midnight. It is against the law for them to declare bankruptcy, but since they can only spend what they are allocated by Westminster, there seems something of a catch 22 about our polity.

Between Middleton and Marsden, there is a belt of green, and there is the curve of the River Rye, which cuts through Durleston Wood. However, year on year the green is nibbled away by houses no one but the rentier class can afford, and who then use them to shackle your children to a lifetime of penury on the treadmill to nowhere - the rentier class being the parasitic spawn of our times, and one of the few growth "industries", alongside pawn shops, betting shops, debt collection, and gut-rot booze.

The town is home to a hundred thousand souls. I do not know where they can possibly live or work, or find meaning any more. I would think on it, but now lack those centres of the brain that might usefully unravel it to a neat, bullet pointed conclusion. Curiously I also lack empathy, not because I do not care, but more because I have reached the inevitable and not unreasonable conclusion there is nothing I can do about any of it.

Since my return, I have rediscovered a walk through Durleston I used to do as a boy. It gets me away from the noise of the scar-faced, pebble-eyed man, affords time to think, and reconnect with the stories of place, which are proving less shy than the faculty of rational thought. If you come along with me, now, I'll show you.

There was a manorial house just here, first recorded in the fourteenth century, now lost to development. One story tells of the explorer Stanley, spending a night there, on his way to Liverpool, and from thence to Africa, in search of Livingstone. That's a fine story, don't you think? And Middleton has its small part in it, though sadly now concreted over and consigned to the darkest and dustiest of archives.

But there were other isolated dwellings here, equally interesting. There were pre-industrial weavers' cottages, mine-buildings, and a water-mill, all gone now, their outlines barely traceable in the weeds. The last of them, Durleston Cottage, hung on until recent years, before going up in flames one night. Some years before that, it was rented by a teacher from the local primary school. Before that, there was a scandal involving a young woman, kept there as a prisoner to satisfy the sexual whims of a criminal. They say the teacher outwitted him in order to rescue the woman, and she showed her gratitude by running away with his life-savings. A sad turn, you might think, except it is also said he ran off with his headmistress. So all ended well, perhaps.

It's a story my father told me, and he got it from the pubs. It was no doubt embellished with each retelling, and therefore, as with all myths, only partially true. Like Stanley and Livingstone, it is a story of place, then, but such things are rare, as if our crumbling world provides too little nourishment for tomorrow's legends to take root, and thrive. We have become closed up, sterile, and afraid to tell our stories. Our science, our technology provides the basis upon which life is possible, but it is our stories that make life meaningful. Like an unfinished house, we have the foundations, the outlines of our

lives, but they blind us to the fact we have nowhere to truly live.

Durleston has changed of course. In my childhood, you could experience these woodlands largely in the wild, as in the days of Ye Olde Englande, and see not a soul all day. But the last pandemic shook all of that up. Masses, furloughed in the cities, and in search of air, exchanging information on social media, sought out every last vestige of green worth its name. In the end they were running coaches here from hundreds of miles away.

My father spoke of processions of pilgrims churning the paths to slime. Then of course, Middleton and Marsden are both much more populous than they were. In short, you'll rarely have this place to yourself, now. There is always somebody about. And these are not people as I once knew them. They pass noisily, leave behind their discarded fast-food cartons, their beer-cans, and they hang bags of dog turds from the trees, or toss them under bushes.

Just here, you see, where the river bends, there is an ancient beech tree, perched high upon the bank. Its latticed roots fan out, and cling to the rock beneath, like the talons of an eagle. I have known and admired it all my life. It must be three or four hundred years old. In the winter storms of last year it lost some of its boughs. They fell to the river. The rest of it looks like it might follow soon. Though inevitable, that such a thing might occur on my watch, strikes me as portentous of the times, which – forgive me – seem terminally regressive.

I note today someone has hung trinkets in the remaining branches. They are small glittery, feathery things with the feel of witchcraft about them. And there is a strip of amber ribbon with a message penned upon it. The characters look like runes. I presume it is a simple substitution cipher. I photograph it with the phone, thinking to unravel it later.

How marvellous our pocket telephones! How ubiquitous, how damaging.

Ciphers, the classical ones, anyway, were a bit of a hobby, and I still dabble, though not as well as I once did. I hope, by my persistence, I might eventually retrain my brain into some semblance of analytical usefulness, but it's proving to be a slow business.

I have tried to discover how Durleston Cottage burned down, but there is an *Omerta* over all talk of it. I therefore invent the story that it was something along the lines of an insurance fraud. There

was a rentier unable to rent it out, and who wanted shut of the place. Thus, Durleston whispers the beginnings of the tale, challenges me to finish it, in the same way it teases me with these witchy things, and these curious rune writings, and it challenges me to make something of them also.

Like all stories, I superimpose them upon the welcoming canvas of the woodland, and its sweet, bounding pastures. Here they run, play out like frolicsome rabbits in imagination. Except now they are interrupted by the crass intervention of these, the litterings of the profane. I'm not talking about the trinkets in the tree. They have the aura of intention, and good meaning about them. I'm meaning the beer-cans and the bags of dog-turds, which have more the feel of insults to meaning, however one defines "meaning" in a meaningless world.

There is something in mankind which cannot help blowing raspberries at anything fine, intellectual, profound. In one sense it's natural to shun such high-thinking, for it does not help survival, I mean in the evolutionary sense. But our civilisations were built to take the pressure off an individual's fear of not meeting his bodily needs, then he might nurture more his soul. Which does rather point the finger at our regression to a more primitive way of thinking. Thus I equate the beer-can in the hedge with the destruction of society. Old people think like this all the time. But I should not be thinking this way, because I am not that old. Not quite. Not yet.

From the deeps of Durleston now, the path climbs to the edge of an emerald meadow, then uphill, towards the setting sun, and to the silhouette of a leaning oak tree. Though I am reminded all things must change in order to remain true, the truth is this scene is unchanged since my boyhood, and it releases a cascade of memories.

There was a hot summer night, when I came this way, sulking over some girl or other whom I never had the courage to ask out, and now she was on the town with another guy. I remember how I looked back over the canopy of Durleston to see the moon rising, painting silvery waves on the swaying, night-damp grasses. *You should have asked her out*, I was thinking. And I still think it. But she was beautiful, intelligent, dazzling,... and I was afraid.

What was her name? It doesn't matter. They were all the same. All of them projections of someone, or something else. It took a

while, but I am no longer prone to such intoxications, and, no doubt, all the poorer for it. Strange, how little success I had with women in England. It was only later, travelling abroad, I found myself the focus of, at times, intense feminine interest, but that was for reasons other than what one might suppose, and we'll get to that.

In the meadow now, I come upon a large developer's notice that gives me pause. It suggests they are to consume the meadow and its neighbours under two hundred homes. But this can't be true, surely? It will obliterate the skyline, and end the privacy, the remoteness of Durleston, turn it more into a dog's toilet than it already is, for dogs must be taken to dump somewhere, and preferably the first bit of green a short walk from the door. The news strikes unexpectedly deep. It's on account of my memories of this place being so keenly romantic, so richly fruited with dreams of the goddess. How dare they defile such a holy thing? But then again, how can they not, for is this not their meaningless function?

On the notice there is what I take to be a sigil, written in felt marker. Do you know what a sigil is? Look it up. It is neat, and as purposeful as the notice it defaces. It too gives notice, then, I suppose. The neo-pagans revere landscape, of course. Perhaps they are as upset at this news as I am. If so, I trust their spell is a powerful one. It will need to be. The developer – let's make a little joke of it and call them "Rick Etty Homes" – is a now global brand. A war with them is likely to be the work of a lifetime, and futile.

No matter. I smell wild garlic, a muddy moistness rising from the meadow. There is also a hint of perfume. There was a woman here, minutes ago. I do not imagine it. All right, so the goddess is stalking me, and if I am not mistaken, I should expect more of her shortly.

Chapter Three

Legal matters

In which we lament the loss of all that once bounded, and nourished our childhood. We lament the dissolution of the security and magic – imagined or otherwise – in exchange for the fragility of adulthood. Ditto, the frugal end game of material realism, in which even the fact of our existence is no longer guaranteed, if it is not properly documented. We visit the offices of the law to instigate legal possession of a thing we most likely will not be keeping for long. We are introduced to a Ms. Elaine Dodds, who disturbs our senses, because we sense that, in other times, we might have been lovers. Ah... if we could only persuade ourselves that particular game was still worth the candle. So...

News of the meadow finds its way into my dreams, which are of bulldozers and a torn earth, which bleeds gold for men in top hats. I make a note in the journal, though this needs little by way of interpretation.

Green land is cheaper to build upon than the old industrial sites. Industrial sites require the expense of remediation, after perhaps centuries of contamination from industries so filthy we have been obliged to export them to less prosperous nations. Thus, we foul our nests, and spread outwards, fouling further as we go, down the generations. I have seen it in India, and in China on a large scale, and always with brutal consequences for the poor.

Is it money or power, the most corrupt of our inventions, and the most corrupting? Yes, I do sound like a Socialist. The service always suspected me of it, tolerated it in the earlier days of my career, when my politics were considered only slightly to the left of centrist. It was less so in the later years by which time political centrism had drifted rightwards, into the pockets of the oligarchy. But there are no simple solutions to what ails the world, just as there are no simple labels to define the man. Call me what you like, you'll most likely miss me by a mile.

I need to see if my suit is in decent shape, and that I have sufficient documentation to prove I am who I say I am. My identity was once one of the most vetted and assured, but I am no longer of that world. I am of the Plebeians now, which requires a different kind of vigilance. I also note the homeland is nowadays seriously enamoured of its prisons, since the privateer cronies of the political

classes have found a way of making them lucrative, at taxpayer's expense. Identity, or rather the lack of its adequate documentation, and especially if one could be considered in any way "foreign", is sufficient to earn one a spell in chokey, while deportation is arranged. It's therefore important at all times to be able to prove who one is. When I left England for the wider world - oh,... sometime in the middle nineteen-eighties - talk of such things would have been considered paranoid, indeed worthy of psychiatric intervention. Now it's so mainstream, we do not even notice it.

I accept my father's death as being in the order of things. The doctor was right. He'd had a good innings, was ninety two and, though he might have had longer with a sharper diagnosis, it's not natural to expect we should go on for ever. Still, I find I am not so readily accepting of the changes in Marsh Avenue, nor that the developers are poised to tear up such a gorgeous run of meadow, or that the beech tree should be hanging by such a slender thread. What then is it in my past, in my self, that will not yet permit such a moving on?

Psychologically, one might say I suffer from a belated Anima complex, that I am stuck in the arms of the Great Mother, and refuse to make my way in the world. But this was not always the case. Indeed, I have known much of the world, including its underbelly - though, it has to be said, as a mostly theoretical concept. No, I suspect it's more that so much of my middle years are missing now, in the rational, analytical sense at least. And in seeking to redress that gap, I had hoped to touch down firmly here, somewhere around nineteen seventy two, to begin my life again, that is from a last known good position. But that datum is no longer here, and I have fallen through instead into the centre of myself, which is proving to be a dark and formless place.

Anyway, my papers - a driving license and voter id registration card – are sufficient to satisfy at least the stern faced business manager of Messrs Battecombe and Bailey, Solicitors at law. I am indeed, she agrees, Mr George Swift, Plebeian of this parish, though looking older on both cards than I am in the flesh. I look startled in fact, also ossified in near monochrome de-saturation.

I need not have bothered with the suit, for I do not get to see the solicitor to impress him with my own (former) professional status. I did not intend this for trivial reasons, but quite seriously to impress upon him the fact he was not dealing with a fool, and so had better

get his finger out. The intelligent Plebeian understands, when dealing with the Patrician order, one must make the necessary adjustments. But the Patrician is out to lunch, has bigger-town airs, beyond Middleton's middling blues. It is for this reason, he delegates our business to his clerk, a Ms Elaine Dodds. This is an attractive woman of middle years, whose demeanour – at least in my presence – hovers disturbingly half way between flirty and snooty.

I wonder if I have made a mistake in my choice of solicitor, only they are the keepers of my father's last will and testament. I have the impression though they have moved on from such piddling matters, and fry much bigger fish these days.

"You're living in your father's house at the moment, Mr Swift?"

"I am. My father would have wanted me to keep the place tidy, the garden I mean. He loved his garden. Though I could do with finding somewhere else to... well... actually sleep."

I don't know why I tell her this. Solicitors and their clerks are on the clock for everything, and I fancy I will be billed for her participation in small talk. There is just something about her that invites confidence, and for a moment, I weaken to it.

"Noisy neighbour," I add.

"Oh, dear. Have you had a word? Often that's all it takes, you know?"

"Well, you'd need to meet him to understand, but I suspect he'd burn the house down for disrespecting him." I soften this with a smile, make a joke of it, steer us back to business, the business of my father's house, and its legal ownership.

But beyond all that, my business sense, indeed my common sense, tells me Middleton, Marsden, and Durleston are finished. They are ruined, robbed out. Those without money cannot escape, or they are hypnotised into believing there is nothing better than this any more, because they have forgotten what better looks and feels like, even though they once owned it, and if not them, their parents for sure owned it in spades. I have seen this in other parts of the world. The phenomenon is well documented, predictable,... why we think we are immune, even as the world collapses around our ears, I don't know.

Me? I'm fine. I could leave any time, live anywhere I want. For now though, I find I lack the peace of mind to do just that. There is something in me, a vital part I no longer recognise, a thing that

must be humoured, like my boat, which, until recently, I had been threading along the canal system. And, like my boat I was searching for something, its direction, willy-nilly, constrained to within the bounds of that which floats it.

What is it about this woman? What is it ever? The curl of her lip, perhaps? The tilt of her chin? The way she dresses? There are no department stores selling clothes like that any more, not round here anyway. There is something about her that is almost French, I think. In some of my dreams, the goddess is an untouchable dominatrix, like this. In others she is a witch, in others a waitress, though she is never a whore.

With the witch, sex is conducted according to ritual, with the dominatrix, it is conducted with the man on his knees. With the waitress... I don't know – it seems crass to say she serves the man whatever he desires, without partaking of it herself, for is that not the definition of a whore? I mean metaphorically speaking. I confuse myself. The nature of the goddess varies from man to man, and for most of my life – at least that I can remember – she has possessed these three aspects.

Why am I aroused to sex, here?

I dismiss the notion with a sigh. I fancy I am, in fact, by now entirely immune to women. I have read there are still groups of younger men in the United States who call themselves involuntary celibates. They are resentful of women for not making themselves more open to their advances, regardless of whether the women in question find the young men attractive or not. I am the opposite. I am *voluntarily* celibate, and gratefully indifferent to women, grateful also they take no genuine interest in me. It's not as difficult as it sounds, and easier as one grows older, of course.

Or do I protest too much?

Anyway, there are papers to sign. We get the ball rolling, so to speak, the ball being the transfer of my father's house, into my name. Then it's her card. I am to call her any time, if I have questions. The answers, I presume, will be billed.

We do not shake hands. No one shakes hands any more, or hugs, and even the kids are wary of sex without an exchange of certificates. *Sex again, George?* The pandemic has left deep scars, though it's years ago now. I do not think we could bear another, though another is inevitable. However, as I, and various of my colleagues, concluded, towards the end of the first decade of the

new millennium, that may well be the least of our worries.

Chapter Four

The Waitress

In which we review our adulthood, and our chosen career, or rather the career that chose us, while being careful not to big the latter up too much. We explain the nature of our invalidity, the cause of our premature retirement and we muse upon our chances of recovery. Then we connect, unexpectedly, with a waitress. So...

You are perhaps wondering from the wandering nature of my narrative, if I have lost my mind, or at least a good part of it, and you would not be wrong. But which part? Well, I'm still exploring that, and you must be patient with me there, but it seems it is at least the part that contains a good portion of the years I knew from my late twenties to my fifties. There are still memories of those middle times, but they are, at times, blurred and mixed up *in* time. And I have lost my ability to function in the world I once knew, for want of a former sharpness of vision and analytical ability, which puts me in my present situation, which is, shall we say, prematurely retired?

My paid role in life was to identify patterns in data, to make connections, and from these to offer predictions regarding emerging trends, be they social, geo-political, or criminal. Now I see patterns everywhere, and everything feels connected, and doom laden. Therefore, so far as the predictions go, anything is possible. Metaphysically, of course, this is true, but it does not help when trawling the outpourings of adversarial noise for signals of an imminent terrorist outrage, or a potential strategic advantage.

The last evening of my old life, I slept in a hotel room in Hong Kong, and woke with a fog on the brain, a sense of vertigo, and a nausea so vicious I was removed on the first available flight. I have not suffered so badly as others from this particular malaise, which strikes the western diplomatic and intelligence communities from time to time. Mine is a profession that requires a degree of sharpness that, once gone, renders you unfit for purpose.

This is not to put on airs, nor is it to cloak myself in the dagger-mystery of a secret agency. Even the most clandestine of diplomatic work has its back office routine of spreadsheets and analysis, its wall to wall computer screens, and its sterile, air-conditioning. That was me. In the earliest of days of course, it was punch-cards and

filing cabinets, and the back-rooms then were vile, smoke-filled places, that felled many of my peers with cancers of the lung.

Pulsed directed energy, at microwave frequencies, is what we surmise now. Whether this was used to charge up the listening devices almost certainly embedded in the walls of our hotels, and diplomatic missions, is unclear, as indeed is the possibility the intent was more deliberately malign. If the latter, I was probably not the intended target.

A more high ranking servant of the crown was assigned the room that night, but switched to me at the last minute to keep Johnny Foreigner guessing. I knew something was up, so cat-napped in a chair, by the door. I don't know how wide those beams are, but I like to think most of it missed, that I will recover my wits eventually. It has affected me strangely, though what effects are genuine, what are psychosomatic, and what are merely on account of my advancing years, I shall never know. Then again, I suppose, in all important respects, nothing that was lost was of any value to my essential being – just close on forty years of experience in the junior ranks of the service.

Anyway, I can at least walk the street without dizziness now, so I walk into town from the solicitor's office. I feel conspicuous in the suit. Indeed, it attracts double-takes. There are no airs in Middleton any more, though the charity bookshop calling itself Donnegan's, is still doing its best. I find in there a copy of the Tao Te Ching, a modern translation, for fifty pence, and take it to the coffee shop, next door, for company.

The Tao that is the real Tao has no name.

Ah... yes. I enjoyed my assignments in China, also India, for their cultural significance, though my constitution struggled with the climate in the latter, during the summer months at least. The part of my brain that deals with cultural matters also seems largely intact, allowing me to peruse them at will, and without the fogginess that obscures the more rational and the scientific.

My... it's still a novelty, sitting in a coffee shop, don't you think? Along with the public houses, they were such terrible sources of transmission, during the pandemic years. It's a mystery why people flocked back to them, long before it was safe to do so. I suppose others are so much more social than I am. Or they were more trusting of the brain-farts of the then administration.

"Hi, what can I get you?"

It's a girl of about nineteen. Tired eyes, cheap shoes, bobbles on her jumper, hasty smear of lipstick. Enough of the thumbnail sketches, George. You are not with the service now. I order coffee, plain and black. She wears a pendant, a pentangle, pointy bit upwards, indicating the lighter path of neo-paganism, as opposed to the more dark and disruptive, which, as everyone, or more likely no one knows, has the pointy bit pointing downwards. Or more likely it indicates nothing but a fashionable mode of self empowerment, in a world where any kind of power of self determination is an illusion. Symbolically though it is the universe communicating synchronistically, linking me back to the beech tree and the feathery, witchy adornments, and to the sigil on the developer's notice.

You wonder at my knowledge of modern witchcraft? It was one of those assignments in the long ago. As usual, I was to analyse the data, and assess the risks contained therein. The consensus of "they who watch" is that witchcraft is mostly harmless. If pressed, I will admit the dark path followers are occasionally troublesome, but only among themselves.

She returns with coffee, and I note the sigil on her hand as she sets it down. It is written, in biro, in the fleshy part between forefinger and thumb. As I have explained, my mind is not so sharp as it once was, but I am inclined to believe it is the same sigil as the one on the developer's notice. It helps that I recognise her scent. This, then, is the author, the spell-mistress, the witch.

As synchronicities go, it is far from the usual whisper, more of a fog-horn alert. This girl is important to me. Were I half the age I am, the prospect might be exciting. As it is, I am merely intrigued.

In turn, she has noticed the book, recognises it, I'm sure, but avoids pointing to the connection. She does not look the shy type, more defensive. Rather a thin girl, there is an intensity in her eyes suggestive of intelligence, an articulation of the lips suggestive of a quick wit, though held in check. Not many so young as she have encountered the Tao Te Jing. Clearly, in better times, she would not be working in a greasy spoon.

So... we take a sip of coffee, settle our thoughts back on our selves. It's not bad... the coffee I mean.

What have I been doing with my life? And can it have been so important a brush of pulsed microwaves could so easily have eradicated it, yet without devastating the more vital part of me?

And what is the vital part? We'll come to that later, if I can work it out. For now though, what I think I was doing all those years shall have to suffice.

I believed I was representing the interests of my country, parochial though that may sound to some of you. However, regarding the extent to which I and my "industry" were successful in our endeavours, I see little evidence of it here, in Middleton, today, or indeed anywhere in the North. So far as I can tell, the home fires burned out here long ago. Which all rather suggests it was not the interests of my country as a whole I was representing, but other more reserved interests, held secure behind portcullis and keypad entry. And the home fires burned out, not for want of attention, but more for want of wood and the price of kindling. In truth then, they did not burn out, they were put out.

Forgive me, my metaphors are sometimes vague and convoluted. The universe and I play this game sometimes, the both of us deliberately vague with our language, and I'm assuming it knows what I mean, even if I do not. I am groping back towards something, using whatever clues are to hand, but in the world I now inhabit, the sensations are strange – the sounds have colour, the scents have an electromagnetic frequency, and the things I see are to be read more like dreams.

Ah... yes... yes, the dreams.

There was a spell of therapy, of course, which involved a lot of dream work. But the analyst called in by the department, was an arse. It did not help, I believe, my training had me instinctively viewing the sessions with her as an interrogation by hostile actors, thus one to be resisted by convincing deception. She wrote me up as resistant, which indeed I was, and just as well, because she killed herself, leaving many she had lured into the analytical transference – this being a total emotional dependence upon her – in the lurch, and thus suicidal in themselves, without her to lean upon. The department wrote that up as an accident, but I knew the woman. Courage or despair? Neither. Like I said, she was just an arse. Psychologically, we are all warriors of our own defences.

And since what I suffered was not a neurosis, or a psychosis, I concluded what I needed was more of a brain mechanic than a psychoanalyst. I might then have asked: what parts of the brain are gone? What parts of my function could be transferred to other bits of it? What bits must be let go of? It seemed a purely practical

matter to me but since the department and I differed on this, we concluded with a parting of the ways.

There was a generous settlement, and no acrimony. I left behind a tidy ship and no enemies, not even, I believe among my erstwhile opposite numbers in those nominally adversarial nations. I had lived like a monk, mostly on expenses, sequestered my salaries into cautiously managed investments. I might be comfortably off, now, if I could only remember who "I" was, which I suppose is the purpose of the quest outlined here. Thus, I take ownership of my injuries and explore the process of healing from all angles.

Why sit on a million in the bank, and live among the neo-proletariat on Marsh Avenue? Well, first of all a million isn't as big a number it used to be. Plus I would not like to spend a penny of it on the impostor I suspect I was in danger of becoming.

The girl is adding numbers behind her counter. She looks up, catches my eye, something curious in it.

Chapter Five

The Brontë-esque

In which we discuss the service, at least in so far as we are permitted to do so. We discuss also the benefits of keeping oneself small. We review our list of characters so far: Me, the Pebble Eyed man, the Waitress, and Ms Elaine Dodds, and we ask the question: is there enough here for a story worth the telling, and what kind of story shall it be? We seek a place away from the mind-jangling noise of bad music, a place where the pace of change is as yet glacial, at least superficially, and where we might set up camp, to write. So...

I have had Amazon deliver me a pair of those noise cancelling headphones. They are expensive, but surprisingly effective in recreating an air of calm against my neighbour's boom box, though they do make one's ears rather hot and itchy. I don't know why I didn't think of them before. I used to spend an inordinate amount of time on aeroplanes, and not always commercial flights. On noise cancelling, I am an expert, for if one can find a way to sleep among the military bits and bobs, on an A400, or in an hotel of both dubious character, and thin walls, one can sleep anywhere. All right, the situation is still not ideal, but the headphones are, for the time being, a way forward.

I used to enjoy the work, though the more liberal of you would likely have frowned at some aspects of it. You will frown also, no doubt, when hostile tanks are parked on your lawns, and then you'll be cursing the incompetence of your diplomats for not having forestalled such an outrageous crisis by sending battleships in advance. You would be outraged also at the brazen flying of Bear bombers down the Mall to drop metaphorical excrement on the monarch, yet reluctant also, I presume, to pay the price in sterling, and vexed morals, for the jet interceptors required to prevent such an incursion.

I'm sorry, I did not mean to confuse you when I alluded to my Socialist leanings. I am not so left leaning, I fall off a cliff. Relations between people are complex and prone to argument, relations between nations are infinitely more complex, and arguments can be fatal. Trust me, it is a very serious business indeed. Too serious to be left to ideologies, and amateur statesmen.

And then again, I remind you I kept myself small within the

service, so my hands were less dirtied than others, but perhaps cleaner than yours, since I'm at least being honest about it. And yes, I know that sounds like cowardice. The most morally questionable thing I have done was to kill a man with a Browning 9mm pistol. Then again, it was either him or me, and what would you have done? Me? I shot him between the eyes, without hesitation, and with a gun I'd only been issued the day before. He perhaps thought me harmless. In a way, that made cowards of us both. I was pleasantly surprised by the accuracy of the shot, as were my colleagues. I have never seen his face in my dreams. But the incident serves to remind me we are all of us killers, given the right, or rather the wrong circumstances. So don't go giving yourself airs. We are all human, all of us in this together, though some of us would rather assume the kinship of angels, than devils. And believe me, you are closer to your devils than you like to believe.

Oh, stop. Leave the poor reader alone, George! You're rambling, groping in that fog for something to draw us forward into our story. What shall it be, then? Cast your story, man... see what bites.

What have we thus far: Villain? The scar faced man will do for now, at least in the absence of bigger fish. Dominatrix? check. Witch and Waitress? Check. As for plot: unscrupulous developers trespassing on our childhood playground, and are they to be stopped? Moral? Oh... something along the lines of: *only when purpose has been used to achieve purposelessness, has a thing been truly grasped.* A bit vague, George, don't you think? And anyway what does that mean? It means science and technology and engineering are all very well in providing the material means of life, but without art and purposelessness, and frivolity, life has no meaning.

Not much of a story is it? Not much of a hook for the reader to hang on to. We must dig deeper.

How about it being a quest: the search for your self?

This means all the characters, the villains and such are to be taken metaphorically, not literally. And the prize? Take your newly discovered authentic self and live off your nest-egg in a securely gated, gentrified suburbia, in a country where you speak the language. But... are we writing this for a reader, George? Or are we writing it for the watcher? I don't know. Let's get out of Marsden for a bit, take a drive and walk, see if we can work it out.

Middleton and Marsden lie at the foot of the West Pennine moors. Look in the direction of sunrise and you will see brown hills

between the rooftops. In my teens, I would thunder over the little moorland roads up there, on a motorcycle. Now I drive a nondescript vehicle, grey and old, but possessed of many horses, and thoroughly ship shape. It stands out nowhere, attracts no attention, but will get me quickly from one place to another in air conditioned comfort. And I can handle the bloody thing. All right? Old habits and all that.

They still keep sheep up here, though in dwindling numbers, which makes me wonder how it can be worth it. The lowland livestock farmers converted to arable, post BREXIT, even when arable put them on a knife edge, but then they had no choice. In the Lake District the Herdwicks become tame and will raid your pockets for food. Here, the Swaledales maintain a disdainful detachment, scattering at one's approach. I note however, the poor Swaledales are steadily being replaced by grazing for rich men's horses.

The sheep's trails thread among lonely hills, which have their own stories. We'll take one at random, head into the heart of this peat-scented country, lose ourselves in the sound of the wind and rising rapture of skylarks.

Stories? Well, there are the standing stones, from the time the land was first settled, and cultivated. Then there are the ruined farms, from the tail end of the Victorian. Then it's the remains of wartime training in the shape of an occasional mortar shell emerging from the peat hags. Then, from more modern times, the story is one of wind-turbines, which, apart from catching water, is all the moors are good for, at least in the strictly material sense. Heaven forbid we should simply let them rest as canvas for the imagination, as a frivolity, as a mirror for catching the likeness of one's self.

Or more:

The process of nature is a closely interwoven mesh of unseen and immense complexity. And as that guru of a newer age, Alan Watts said, though I perhaps paraphrase slightly: "*it's really impossible to tell whether anything that happens in it is good or bad, because you never know what will be the consequences of a misfortune. Or, you never know what will be the consequences of good fortune."*

That newer age? I'd put it between 1950 and 1970. The Beat generation, and the hippies. We've been going backwards ever since, back further into the ever-olden days, as depicted in the nationalistic pre-woke presses. I had thought by now Zen would

have been more securely captured by the west, as the eastern sages I met suggested was its destiny. But still we resist, at least in sufficient numbers as can make a difference. And the time is growing old.

Too old, perhaps, to make a difference.

What am I doing? I've come up here, I suppose, to read the signals of nature, try to separate out some patterns from the noise. It seems such a bleak, wind-blasted Brontë-esque sort of place, looks frigid, mono-cultural. But if you root down among the grasses and count their variety you get a clearer picture of what is going on. And among the ruined farms there are the remains of human frivolity in the shape of ornamental trees, along with the more feral sycamores, and beech, all of them left long to their own devices. They have had a century of freedom here.

Here, at this pile of gritstone ruins, once a farm, we find a stunted beech in the reed-bound lane, barely hanging on, and in the rushes there is a stone from the megalithic period. It lay hidden here for centuries, immersed in drystone walling. But now the walls have fallen away to reveal it. Many that remained exposed were broken up by religious zealots, or used as lintels in the barns, around the same time we were murdering witches. You see? It is a place rich in stories. Any one of these beginnings might spawn an epic.

From here, we can see other hills, more distant, bristling with the tilting pylons of wind-generators, but this bit, the bit I know, remains, on the surface at least, untouched. What might touch it, I wonder. For it will be lost too, in time, and must be let go of, like the beech tree in Durleston Wood.

The stone quarries here are long dead, so it shall not be to dynamite and bulldozer. It is far cheaper to dismantle mountains in China, and ship their stone here, than chip it from our own landscape. More turbines then? Always a possibility, but this is a designated area of scientific interest. That ought to mean something? And at between a thousand and fifteen hundred feet, it is too high for comfortable habitation.

No, I can think of no immediate threat. Perhaps then I should remove myself from Marsh Avenue for a while, cast my stories upon the moors instead and see what takes root inside my own being? I don't know. Anyway, time to go, now. The sun is only half an hour from setting, and I would not like to make my way down in

darkness. My eyesight is not what it was.

We follow the marked way in a circle of sorts, circle back from the moor and emerge in the yard of one of the few farms still to exist up here. It is of the traditional Lancashire longhouse design, sympathetically modernised. There is the scent of hay and sheep, and something cooking. There is a notice that says: Room for rent. Another synchronicity. I tap on the door, and enquire.

The sky is darkening and a deep-throated wind is getting up. The door opens.

I am expecting a burly Heathcliffe perhaps, high collar and tousled hair, gruff tone. "State your business, and be gone!" But it's an elderly lady, small, grey eyed, benign, sweet. The eyes take me. The last time I saw eyes like that they belonged to a wise old gentleman, in Kyoto.

"Hello," I said to him. "My name's,..."

He held up a hand to stop me. "I know exactly who you are, he said. The thing is, do you?"

But back to Lancashire, and my Brontë-esque fantasy.

"I was wondering about the room."

"Hundred a week," she says. "Want to see it?"

Jasmine, her name. Long, steely hair, braided. Archetype of sorts. Something late-Edwardian about her – I mean in a Bloomsbury-Bohemian sort of way. Bedroom, small bathroom, stout desk looking out over the sunset-moors. Midnight would see no lights from it.

"Communal kitchen," she says.

"You have others staying?"

"A couple of students, not the noisy sort. One professional lady. Not the noisy sort either."

"No loud music then?"

"No, I wouldn't put up with that. We like it quiet here."

Perhaps she is not so sweet after all. Something of the dragon about her, though softened with that smile, and the wise eyes.

I like her.

"How's the Internet?"

"You can hook into the house WiFi. It's all included. It's not the fastest, but the students don't seem to mind."

"If it's good enough for them, it'll be more than good enough for me. I'll take it... I mean, if you think I'm suitable."

She makes a show of looking me up and down. "You'll do," she

says. It seems she likes me too.

I recall my mother saying the same when I was five, setting out on my first day at school. "You'll do," she'd said. It's a north country thing. We always understate matters. *I have prepared you for the world, and you are more than equal to the challenge. Now you must enter it and make your way.*

Now this woman, says the same thing, that I'll do, as if to announce my preparedness for whatever comes next. You're up to the challenge, George. It is the kindest thing anyone has said to me in a long while, or least it would have been if she had meant it in that way.

I didn't make such a bad fist of my time in the world, did I? No worse than most, I suppose.

Like my mother, I hope she's right.

Chapter Six

Ciphers

In which we try to unravel the cipher, if indeed that is what it is, and we discuss the options for doing it. We settle into the new-found peace of our moorland retreat, and we listen to the Morse code of the hills and the wind. The pebble eyed man makes an unsubtle offer for my father's house, and a lone tree falls. So...

It is a six inch long piece of pale ribbon, an inch wide, somewhat weathered, now, but the tiny runes are perfectly legible. Indeed, they are drawn with a regularity and a focus that is only possible with the human hand, and a strong soul in the driving seat, possibly also a magnifying glass. The question is, what manner of runes are they? Wiccan, and other esotericists favour the so-called Theban alphabet, this being, at its simplest, a substitution cipher – each rune character representing a letter of the alphabet. But these are not Theban characters, nor are they of the Germanic, Futhark types, though they are similar, and are possibly of bespoke gamer-origin.

Whatever they are, given enough material, such a cipher is vulnerable to attack through the single letter words "I" and "a", also through identifying the most frequently used letters, such as the letter "e". Then there are the common pairings like "q" and "u", "t" and "h". You can add further complication to the cipher by employing a shift in the substitution, but this method is literally as old as Julius Caesar, to whom the substitution method is ascribed, but this is also vulnerable to pencil and paper analysis.

For all my fancy talk here, I was considered a dunce in my cipher training, a ranking I still take as a compliment, since my classmates were possessed of minds one might reasonably have considered superhuman. That said, anything more complex than a simple substitution, or a Caesar shift, is likely to defeat me.

Sure enough, it does so in short order, but not unpleasantly. This is recreation. I am merely curious, exploring pathways in the mist. It is also my first time at the desk, in the window, overlooking the moor. The noise-cancelling headphones lie to one side. They are not needed here. A soft lamp illumines the notebook, un-ruled, vanilla-coloured paper, now marked with runes, like an ancient text. Strange, how the headphones connect to my laptop through the

Bluetooth function, whose logo is itself a combination of Futhark runes. Such connections are no longer trivial when, like me, you see patterns everywhere.

The old farmhouse has a solid feel to it, deadening the sounds of the other occupants, whom I have yet to meet. They carry out their lives quietly. The most obvious sound is the wind, and a gentle tapping of the sash, which is a little loose. There is a wedge on the sill to silence it, should it prove annoying, as I assume it did to the previous occupant. I let it tap. I fancy there is Morse code in it, random letters, sometimes short words, as if the moor itself is trying to find a way to speak the mind of the universe to me. After the bedlam of Marsh Avenue, it is a blessing to imagine such things again.

Anyway, back to my cipher of runes. There are clever online tools for cracking all the classical ciphers, nowadays – even the more complex ones, like the Playfair, the Vigenère , the Nihilist, and all the multifarious themes thereon. The one proviso is the encryption keys must be short. Longer keys add complication and will defeat machine analysis.

Anyway, we substitute Latin notation for the runes, thinking to feed them into the machine, but at this point we discover there are more rune characters than letters in the alphabet. I count upwards of seventy. This is a cunning cipher, with at least three potential substitutions per letter. On the other hand it is nothing, and we are searching for patterns in the noise of a child at play, rather than a mind of serious intent.

I don't know how witchcraft feeds into the pattern yet. I would be wise to rule nothing in or out. The esoteric is a strange place, conjures up demons in the hearts of the insecurely devout. Yet it also seeks love, connection, and harmony, same as any other spiritual practice worth its salt. It seeks too, the protection of the universe from the tyranny of chaos, and ill fortune. That's better than a bullet in the head, anyway.

So, hot bath. Bed at midnight, listening to this blessed silence. And I sleep deeply, blindfolded by the profound dark of the moors which rise all around hereabouts. I must ask Jasmine if she is charging enough, for I would willingly pay double for such luxury. Then I'm up, and out by first light into the moor-fresh air. There are yellow-lit clouds to the east, pink to the west. There are human and animal sounds from the barns across the yard, but nothing I need

make the acquaintance of. I shall take breakfast in Middleton, then check on my father's house.

As I drive I am still musing on the runic spell. I reason – were I the esotericist – I would not encrypt such a message, a spell, a prayer... or whatever it is, before writing it out. That would be too cumbersome. The characters must have come out of the mind that wrote them, as they were needed, or it would not be an effortless expression of will, as I imagine such things must be, in order to be effective in the esotericists' world view.

Each letter of the alphabet is therefore represented by several characters, and they are chosen at random as the mind presents them, and as they are written. Might such a thing even be crackable by someone else, without knowing the transposition? Multiple, random symbols representing each letter? And what manner of mind would think up such a thing? What manner of mind might be capable of deploying it with such grace, and such intent? In a purely material world, it might seem pointless, literally pointless as prayer. But many is the intelligent mind to have found insufficient rest in logic. Such a mind leaves the trails, and goes in search of rarer game.

Fledgling weeds have begun to pepper the front borders of my father's house. They fall to the hoe. If I ever had a purpose in life, it seems to have boiled down to the trivia of household maintenance. But it has also reined itself in, closer and closer to the present moment. There is not much by way of planning, not much by way of future, only dealing with what arises, as it arises. I had thought such a thing would be annoying to me, but I find it is not.

"All right there, Mate?"

Ah... the pebble eyed man is loading his salivating hounds into the truck. He calls a greeting, somewhat gruff, but not unfriendly. This, of course, dents my stereotype of him, makes him almost too human to be the villain of my story. But then I am forgetting, even the most violent of our enemies have presented human faces to their neighbours.

He seemed quite the ordinary, friendly chap, you know?

"Good morning."

"How's the old fella going on, then? Not seen him for a bit."

"My father? He passed away."

He seems genuinely struck by this. "Oh. Sorry to hear that, mate. So, you livin' here now?"

"Part time. Just to keep on top of things, you know?"

"You'll be selling it on, like?"

"Not sure."

"Let us know if you do."

"Oh? You'd be interested?"

"Aye. I could knock through, then, see? Park me truck in't front room like. Make a garage of it. Pay you cash, mind. On the nose."

He says this with a straight face and no malice. He merely has no sense of the history of the house, the feelings it arouses in me, the thought of his truck being parked in the middle of it, where I used to play with my Lego bricks, and him knocking through – it all seems the most unspeakable of violations.

There might have been more of an exchange than this, but the hounds become quarrelsome, straining to have at me over the fence, and drag him with them. He chides them severely, and with foul language, beats them with the free end of their lead, then secures them in the truck. He backs it out. A quiet interlude then, while he is gone. He is looking at me as he drives, black eyes, cold in their appraisal. We would none of us look our best in a police mugshot, but I swear I have looked into countless eyes like that before, and none of them have belonged to good men.

Cash, he said. He's some sort of dealer then, looking to launder through property, I suppose.

Two hounds, one to take the hind quarters, the other the throat. It's a messy way to kill. Indeed it's medieval, when nowadays, a man in all his cleverness could inflict less suffering on a beast, if its flesh was his intent, rather than merely its death. But then we are forgetting, this is the sport of kings and they prefer to have the spectacle of blood and viscera.

I have been mostly vegetarian since my time in India.

I know I have to let this place go. But must it be this way, selling to a man like that? Must I exchange my father's house for money stained with the blood of innocents, across the supply lines of the biggest and bloodiest trade ever, save perhaps slavery?

He lived here too, you know? In Marsh Avenue. I mean that teacher who made off with his headmistress, and outwitted sex traffickers to boot. Hunter. Richard Hunter was his name. We are of a similar age. I remember him, from the time we were boys, went to the same primary school, Marsden C of E. I remember his father too, a kindly, chess playing man. We each left for our universities,

around the same time, and never saw one another again. He raised a family in America, my father said. I wonder what it was that brought him back.

I wonder if he found it in his headmistress.

Me? I say I'm looking for the missing part of me, but I'm not sure that's true. Perhaps it's more a question of asking if there was anything there in the first place, and if not, then would I mind it very much if there wasn't?

So, anyway... the house is ship-shape again, the garden immaculate. The weather is also fair, so I head for the woods. I am thinking there might be other scraps of ribbon in the tree, more rune writings. The more material one has, the greater the chance of breaking the cipher. I approach that part of the wood from the meadow, but it's clear before we enter, there is something wrong, a disturbance in the pattern of things. It's hard to describe at first, a shape written in light and space, and it has the taste of iron.

The tree has fallen!

I hasten, as if in doing so I can travel back in time and prevent it from happening. I stumble over the stile into the wood, and find all that's left of the tree is a stump. It's shoulder height, no more, and the rest is broken into pieces in the river below, some of it scattered across the far bank, having brought down other, lesser trees with it – aged green, contrasted with the splintered white of a million fatal wounds. The stump is hollow, rotten, perhaps for decades. Even as I sat under it, as a boy, it was already dying.

I wonder if it fell alone, and in silence.

Chapter Seven

A lone tree falls

In which we speak of Zen, and philosophy, and how we perceive the universe. We consider briefly if the moon is still there when we are not looking, lose ourselves in quanta, and the Tao. We consider the benefits of the Buddhist position of non-attachment, and why the corporate world would rather we were all Buddhists, if only in one respect. We make friends with a witch, and fear we may have weakened her spells by trying to read them. So...

A tree falls alone in the forest – it makes no sound. I am told by western students of the orient this is a Zen koan, but I can find no primary sources to support that claim. It is also said to be a thought experiment of the eighteenth century philosopher, and theologian, George Berkeley. I suspect neither are true. But I admit, there is a certain flavour of Zazen about it, a sudden vertigo of the senses, when contemplating the notion.

I suppose it depends on labels, and how one defines the word "sound". After all, it is a man-invented thing, a naming word, and if what we mean by "sound" is that which is perceived by the man-invented word "ear", then no, it makes no sound. If, however, we broaden the meaning to include the manifestation of vibrations in the medium of air, then yes, it makes a sound, though not as a human being would normally perceive it.

Is the universe then to be defined solely by how we perceive it? Indeed, what is it, to be a human being, perceiving the universe? This is a philosophical question, and some such lines of enquiry end up by asking: does the moon still exist when we are not looking at it? All of which, in turn, leads us to the physics of quanta, and, I suppose, the answer to that one is yes; the moon exists, if only because we are not, our individual selves, the sole genitors of the universe, that indeed the moon continues, in our ignorance of it, because someone, or rather some "thing" else is looking, covering our shift, so to speak. Its perception, if not its actual manifestation, is what we share in. Its manifestation though, is a function of the universe, and we can never know what that's like, in itself, for there are no nouns to describe it.

The Tao that is the real Tao has no name.

Yes, really. This is what I'm thinking as I sit, as I have always

sat, in this same knot of root, my back to the tree, which is now this ugly, lifeless stump. But now, without the canopy above, there is a feeling of nakedness, my thoughts lifted, spiralling upwards like feathers, to be scattered by the light and the wind, before I can dwell upon them.

"When did it fall? Do you know?"

"What?"

It's a young woman. She's standing behind me, slight of frame, a thick, dark mop of hair covering all but the smallest pale oval of her face. I did not hear her approach for the sound of the river. She is wrapped tight, in an old gabardine mackintosh, and her eyes are red with spent tears. But wait! I know her. It's the waitress, the witch. This encounter is unlikely, but as a narrative device, it makes sense, so you must allow it.

"I was here only last week," I tell her. "It hadn't fallen then."

"I suppose it came down on Thursday," she replies. "That was a stormy night. Are you all right? I was watching, just now, you looked a bit..."

What? She asks after me? Is she a befriender then?

"I'm all right. It's a shock. I've known this tree since I was a boy. I suppose it's like losing one's grandparents. Though you know it's bound to happen, because they're getting old, you still don't expect it. You hide from it."

She nods in some understanding, not just literally, but I sense she picks up on the metaphor too, or am I projecting the genius of the goddess upon her? It would not be the first time, though rarely does the projection settle upon one so young. She cannot possibly be so old and wise as my imagination paints her.

"Sorry. My name's George. I used to live up in Marsden. I was always walking around here."

"I'm Winona. I come round a lot, too."

"Winona. Actually, I recognise you from the coffee shop in town."

"Yes, I know. You're the man in the suit, with the Tao Te Ching."

She remembered? Interesting. "A curious combination, I'll grant you."

"Have you read it?"

"Oh... does one really read a book like that? I mean cover to cover, like a story? Or does one dib into it now and then, like a collection of poetry, and see what chimes with the day?"

She looks around at the gap in the canopy, then down at the ruin of the tree. "It's nature's way, I suppose. Still, it feels like an ill omen. Things are changing around here. And not for the better."

"You mean the development on the meadow?"

"You know about that?"

"I've seen the notice. You oppose it?"

"Everyone round here does. Including the council. But the government's pushing it."

"You wrote that sigil on the notice?"

"Dunno. Maybe. What do you know about sigils?"

"They're like spells, or intentions, wrapped up in a symbol. It's the same symbol you have penned on your hand."

She hides her hands behind her back, then thinks on it, and reveals them again. "You've got sharp eyes, George."

"They will take it, you know? We have to accept that. We have to swallow that loss and live with it. I assume you're trying to protect it with magic, like you were maybe trying to protect this tree. But we need to consider the possibility it's a different kind of magic that's needed."

"What kind would that be then?"

"Something that will grant us both an opening to transcend it. It's a trial, Winona. A personal one."

"You're with the craft?"

"Oh... no. Nothing like that. All due respect to you and your... your kind."

"But you must have read my runic? All of that, what you just said, was in the runic. How did you read it?"

"I didn't read it."

"I saw you photograph the ribbon. I was in the shadows, over there. Why else do that if you weren't going to read it?"

The possibility seems to have disturbed her, and I am sorry for that. Had I known, I would not have done it. But she's right, this is an ill omen.

"I was curious, that's all. Codes. Ciphers. They were a... a hobby of mine. But I couldn't make your script out at all."

She's relieved, her eyes, captive birds a moment ago, slide free of me now. And I'm relieved she's relieved. There's a curious energy about her, and I would not like to subvert it. I make a silent promise that, as a matter of honour, I shall delete the photograph, and burn the notes, so as not to weaken her magic. The meadow is

as good as gone, gone as the tree, but this is not to say those responsible might not receive some karmic kick-back. And to hell with them.

"You have an old head on you, Winona. No disrespect."

She cracks a smile. "Not as old as yours, George. No disrespect."

"Ha! You will be careful though, won't you?"

"Careful?"

"You youngsters have such energy, and passion. And you can be admirably blunt, when you come up against injustice and the bullshit of those who cleave to the material world. But this developer... such entities as those, they own governments, you understand? Ours is not the tolerant nation the myths of Albion would still have us believe. Plus, in practical terms it's impossible to find any way of meaningfully protesting nowadays, without a spell in chokey. Our prisons are plentiful, profitable, disgusting places, and hungry for souls such as yours, and mine. The times demand circumspection, Winona, and cunning."

"I know... and thank you. But so far as I know nothing's planned. Everyone's moaning about it on social media, but no one's coordinating. I'm not in touch with any groups over it. You really think that's the most important thing? To let it go?"

"The Buddhists would say so. It sounds defeatist, I know."

"Bet the developers wished we were all Buddhists then."

"Fair point. Yes. I'm sure they do. But that is also to miss the point. And I mean... entirely."

"Concrete the whole world if they could. Burn the forests. Have us all live in little plastic boxes, and sell us bottled air to breathe, after they've poisoned the rest of it."

"Oh... indeed they would. They are complete and utter bastards, and worse, they are in charge."

"What would you have us do instead then? I mean apart from just let it all go."

"Find our selves, Winona. Perfect ourselves. That's all any of us can ever do. Under any circumstances, fair or foul."

"And where do we look for us selves, then?"

She playing with me now, something impish in her smile. I'm coming across as the wise old man, when we both know I'm not. But neither am I entirely bullshitting. I don't know where this stuff is coming from, exactly. A hundred conversations over the decades, a hundred books, a lifetime of speculation and dreams, I suppose.

"We'd look in the cracks, in the spaces between. Someone once told me if we can forget everything we think we are, then what's left, that's who we are."

"Doesn't sound like we're much of anything, then."

"Oh we're not. Indeed we're nothing. We are all of us nothing, Winona. Going nowhere. That's a key insight."

"Thanks a bunch. Right cheerful soul you are."

"Something I read once. Saying it is one thing. Feeling it is another."

"Yea, well. Leave you to it, George. See you in the coffee shop sometime, eh?"

"Right you are. And nice to meet you, Winona."

Nice?

I had a teacher, long ago, who hated that word. Use another, he would say, something more *descriptive*, but we are touching souls here, and there is indeed something *nice* about the encounter with Winona, the witch and the waitress. *Nice* is softly pleasing, it is inoffensive, polite, innocent, it is possessed of a delicate charm. "Nice" covers all these multi-syllabled things in a single-syllabled, all purpose, four letter word. The teacher was a philistine. There were far more important things he could have found worthy of his insufferably high horse.

Grief.

I feel a welling of grief, now. Such precious memories of this place, of my father's house on Marsh Avenue too. But everything's pointing me to the fact I can no longer find myself here. Why bring me back then, if it is only to break the chain in the very place the chain was forged?

Chapter Eight

Carnage

In which... we encounter the savagery of pebble-eyed men, and find ourselves taking those precautions that were once second nature when attempting to remain elusive in potentially hostile territory. We hint at the intelligence we might be gathering in respect of uncovering an important secret, more important than anything else in the world. We meet the young ones, Cerise and Milo, and agree to dine with them. So...

I return to the farm in the late of evening, and to a scene of carnage. There is a quad-bike, with a trailer that holds the remains of sheep, two of them I think. There is a Land Rover in police livery, and an officer. She wears black militaristic garb, as is the way these days, and which I always find disconcerting. I have grown used to seeing it in other nations, states that were hostile to the populace and where their law enforcement looked and behaved like an occupying army. This is not fully, or at least not overtly, the case yet, in Albion, more a finger pointing to a future I am glad to be avoiding, on account of my age. But still...

I do not involve myself in the drama, yet even in passing I can see the poor creatures have been torn apart and must have suffered terribly. Yes, I'm likely thinking the same as you here, but surely that is too much of a leap? Besides, there are many men in camo these days, training bull-lurcher dogs to kill, and God help anyone who tries to stop them. They are another finger pointing to that same future, one of violence and insecurity.

There are youngsters in the kitchen, the students I presume. They are boiling pasta, and there is the aroma of garlic. They are Milo and Cerise. Milo is bearded, big haired, and of dark complexion. Cerise is pale and red haired. Both have rings in their noses, several in their ears. They are polite, gracious, leave off their cooking to make introductions. She is home counties. He is Italian. I had thought the British universities were no longer attractive to overseas students, on account of the dual disincentive of increasing costs, and declining reputation. They are studying literature, which is also in significant decline.

Oh, but isn't it terrible about the sheep, George?

It is, indeed, yes.

And who would do such a thing?

So upsetting. Poor Jasmine.

Indeed, poor Jasmine.

Then it's: will I dine with them on Friday? We were thinking it would be lovely for us all eat together on Fridays, George, and would you join us? *Oh, do join us, George, please!* I tell them I am vegetarian, and wouldn't want to put them to any trouble. But they are also vegetarian. And isn't *everyone* these days? And what a pleasure to meet an 'older' person who is a vegetarian. *Apologies for use of the word 'older'.* I tell them, in that case, I shall be happy to join them, and what shall I bring with me as my contribution? Wine, they say. That, I say, will be my pleasure.

Jasmine does not strike me as the sentimental type, weeping over lost sheep. Hill farmers are a hardy breed, though she may of course regret their suffering. I wonder if there are guns here. Reminder to readers unfamiliar with Britain: guns are not widespread here. Farmers possess shot-guns, to reduce vermin, however loosely that species is defined. They also, on occasion, shoot dogs worrying livestock, though the latter point is legally fraught.

I am feeling dizzy again, and pause before I climb the stairs to my room. It sometimes comes out of the blue like this. I have been away too long today, and without proper nourishment. I will no doubt be in a fog tonight, so there is no sense trying to write much down. I shall just clear the rune notes, delete the photographs from the laptop. They have already gone from my phone. It's time I was changing the phone, too. I have had this one long enough now for the device ID to have been snagged in the national dragnet, and for its movement patterns to have been noted, cross referenced, and its ownership surmised by AI.

No, the UK is not exactly a hostile country, at least it shouldn't be so to me, but I find myself these days instinctively operating within it as if it were, which means elusively, denying the enemy whatever information I can. This is most perplexing. There have been many regimes I have worked in that required such circumspection. One could feel it the moment one stepped off the aeroplane. I don't know why I feel like that here. I mean I am not *operating*, am I? I am at leisure. I am, for heavens sake, *retired*. The intelligence I am gathering is of an entirely esoteric and personal nature, and my enemies are both imagined and unconnected to the quest. Or are they? Is it censure I fear, or merely ridicule?

"Are you all right, Mr Swift?"

Jasmine. She is just in from the yard, has a smear of blood on her jeans.

"I'm well, Jasmine. Thank you. Please, call me George. I'm terribly sorry to see you've had some trouble."

"Not the first time," she says.

"Dogs, was it?"

"Most likely," she says.

"Is there much of that sort of thing in these parts?"

"Hasn't been too bad around here, up till now. But this is the second time this year, so far. Is the room all right for you?"

"Oh, it's perfect, thank you. I'm very glad to have found it."

"So, what do you do, George? You work in town?"

"No, I'm retired, Jasmine. A little prematurely, but all the same,.."

"And before that?"

"Oh, Civil Service. Terribly dull, I'm afraid."

"I see."

Better steer her away, George. "Do you manage the farm alone?"

"Me and a couple of lads, Pete and Chris. It was Chris who found the sheep. It was probably walkers with dogs. There's a boom in demented dogs since the pandemic. If only they'd keep them on leads."

"It must have been big dogs to do that to a sheep. Perhaps more than one. Hunting dogs, do you think?"

"Could be. No matter. The lads will sort them out if they catch them."

I am thinking it would perhaps be better for the lads if they did not catch anyone. The more organised, and the more money is involved, the more dangerous the problem. But clearly Jasmine is inclined towards the theory of stupidity, rather than conspiracy. I have a suspicious mind, naturally, and now all things are connected, I see threats everywhere

The moor has a bleaker look to it this evening. The view from my window reveals a flat landscape under a uniform sky of flake-white, tending to grey. It does not flirt with the senses, does not cloak itself in mystery and romance. Dogs like those belonging to the scar faced man are worth a lot of money, and more in the currency of manly prestige, when sported amongst other like-minded men. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility they be

sported against grazing sheep, for practice, for a taste of blood, or even wager.

But these are not country dwellers, more likely urbanites. Countrymen, of a rule, pass quietly. And while they are known to take game that is not theirs, they do so wisely and without inflicting suffering. They move with nature, and not agin' it. But hare-coursing, lamping, badger-baiting, these things cut across nature. For the scar faced men, the suffering is either incidental to the exchange of money, or to be enjoyed in its own right. This has always gone on, of course, but from the reports it seems more prevalent now. And yes, it's dawning on me it might also be significant in a personal sense, it being brought, by fate, to my attention this way. I mean, are we not all of us increasingly the innocent creatures to be torn apart by dogs, for the dubious gain of pebble eyed men?

It is another cause of personal sadness, which also feeds into a sense of failure, that we let the home fires burn out this way. Can it really be my country is so rotten from top to bottom, now? Cerise and Milo are delightfully child-like in their innocence, and long may that continue. But one morning they will wake corrupted by this poison, or be rendered speechless that, try as they might, there is nothing they can do to stop the colour bleeding from their world.

They say in the pandemic, it was a miracle how the vaccines were developed so quickly, or the world might have been a very different place now. And while this is undoubtedly true, a testament to the cleverness of mankind, a world like the one we live in now is already meaningless, for cleverness, as such, has no meaning, without the magic of the runes to balance it.

Chapter Nine

Dinner

In which we dine with Cerise and Milo, surmise they are lovers and discover we are embarrassed by that. We discover that whatever we say about being safely beyond the phase of sexual attraction, it is not necessarily to be relied upon, that we would indeed rather like to be the lover of someone, still. We learn of the flexibility and the adaptability of youth, in contrast to our own limited options in the world. And, if you have not already guessed it, we learn the identity of the professional lady, who also resides in our farmyard apartments. So...

Friday evening. Cerise and Milo. We sit out at an ancient, sun-bleached table, on a raised flag-stoned corner of the yard, overlooking the moor. Here, we enjoy a Pepper Ricotta, from a recipe by Milo's grandmother, ingredients via Tesco's online delivery, and a few bottles of wine from me which Cerise politely complains are too expensive for the occasion. The youths are good company. They are witty, articulate, and intelligent.

I find it always does me good to spend time with twenty-somethings. Their energy and enthusiasm are infectious, and it makes one less prone to cynicism, unless of course they too have already fallen foul of that particular pathology. I note their body language, which suggests they are lovers, a thought I'm surprised to discover I find mildly embarrassing. Indeed, I try not to think of it for, though it is an aspect of my own life I no longer indulge, that is not to say I do not look back upon it with a certain fondness. Perhaps, then, there is a part of me who was not willing to let go of it so soon.

I had also been hoping to make the acquaintance of the professional lady, with whom Jasmine informed me we also share a roof. However, Cerise complains the lady is snooty, and considers herself above our company. Milo defends her, saying she is not snooty at all, but a lady of refinement, of mannerisms that are somewhat dated now, but would once have been considered merely lady-like. And did she not tell us, with apologies, that most weekends she's away visiting her aged mother? Cerise admits,

begrudgingly, this is indeed the case. But I sense there is a bad chemistry between them, which interests me. I have found women can be quick to judge, and slow to forgive, even when there is nothing to be forgiven.

We talk of literature, and then, against my better judgement, the conversation drifts into politics. They are leftist to an extreme, as befits their age. Marx is mentioned in passing, of course, but I suspect they merely wave him as a flag, rather than being intimate with his writings. Myself, I am reasonably well acquainted, professionally, and naturally cautious, preferring to see him in his historical context, than as a fix-all guru for our present day ills.

But there is a world to be saved, they say, and who can argue with that? It requires a massive redistribution of money and power, and nothing short of a revolution will do it. I sense they are also teasing me a little, thinking perhaps I am of the opposite political colours, on account of my age, and therefore easily baited. But I am not, and can not. I only tell them I'm not sure the world can be transformed to their liking any more, having seen much of it at work, that indeed history teaches us all attempts to dramatically change things, no matter how well meaning, usually end in tyranny of one sort or another. People are contrary, they are irrational, and must be contained somehow within acceptable limits if they are to live together in large numbers, that perhaps the best kind of control is one which creates the illusion of freedom, and is that not where we are, now?

I am not at all serious in this. I merely enjoy teasing them in return. It would make my heart glad to reduce the queue outside the food-banks, and put a roof over the heads of the homeless, who are now legion, and of whom, but for the grace of god, we might each of us be a member, shivering off our balls each winter, begging alms. Perhaps the role of the left, I say, is to counter, in small ways the excesses of the right, albeit outside the halls of power, which are mostly the preserve of money. More, should we not be happy that leftists are tolerated at all in England, when in other parts of the capitalist world, they would be arrested? Though, having said so, I remind myself that any attempt to organise, or indeed to protest en-mass will be put down and, nowadays, brutally – all of which does rather undermine my point. The left's pathway to power was lost before the pandemic, and if there is a magical spell at all to be cast, like the loss of my own past, it is to achieve a

state where we simply do not mind it any more.

Yes, yes. I know. I've said this to Winona. I don't think she agreed with my analysis, and admittedly it does sound rather defeatist. So it is my self I am talking about. I must find that place from which I do not mind anything any more. Cerise, likewise, is nonplussed, but does not challenge me directly. Instead, she changes the subject to the phenomenon of van-life, and the way it is being sold on social-media, and in movies, with a straight face, as a "cool" lifestyle choice for hipsters, rather than a step away from homelessness.

"I mean, have you ever slept in a van over winter, George?"

"I have not, Cerise. I imagine it is most unpleasant."

"And where are we supposed to pee? Surely this is a return to the middle ages."

On the subject of vans and toilets, Milo laments the erosion of workers rights, to the extent our delivery drivers must excrete into plastic bags, in their vehicles, so as not to miss algorithmically set productivity targets. Thus the conversation reaches a low, and after a moment or two of reflection, I attempt a further change of subject.

What are their plans for the future?

Oh, Cerise is to apply for Irish citizenship, courtesy of an Irish grandmother.

"You'll be going to Ireland, then?"

"No," she says, with a glance at Milo. "I'll be settling in Germany, post grad. I just want my European citizenship back."

"And you, Milo?"

He shrugs. "Germany sounds good to me. At least I am welcome there. I mean, already being a European citizen."

Alas, poor George, they're saying, cast adrift in his leaky old tub, HMS Albion. They have a point, of course, but I no longer care about the drowning. I fill their glasses. It's a great pity, of course. Albion needs sharp, internationalist children like these, but they are set to leave us. Indeed, Milo is nagged constantly about the validity of his visa, has already been questioned by a broken nosed bruiser from the department of enforcement Wombles. Their ignorance does not recognise genius. Or if it does, it can only despise it.

"They will maybe send a van when I have sat my finals and take me to the airport in handcuffs." Milo is only partly joking, asks if I know a good immigration lawyer who can spare him the indignity. I

have to remind myself Milo is Italian, that Albion is not a rogue state, though many of my erstwhile foreign opposite numbers now consider it to be sleepwalking along that path.

I tell him I only know the one solicitor's practice, but suspect they are not immigration specialists. I retrieve the card from my wallet and show it to him. He exchanges a look with Cerise, and they laugh. Unless they are mistaken, I have already met the professional lady who is conspicuous by her absence. It is a Ms Elaine Dodds. Some meet-cute! Or is that cute-meet? Or not. Dammit, George, does this make things awkward? I mean our both living here? Well, only if we let it. Yes, but I know myself, and it's inevitable. I shall begin by ignoring her, while at the same time projecting the goddess upon her. And how do I know she is worthy?

It doesn't matter. Time will have its way.

We straighten the kitchen, clean the pots. The evenings are comfortably long now, so I send the children to bed to make their love, with the remains of the wine, and I walk out a little way across the moor, to the first of the ruins. There is a sycamore tree in the corner of it that I can set my back against, and from there watch while the sun sinks into the golden hour.

Chapter Ten

Problems with women

In which we discuss the nature of my problems with women, both psychological and practical, and we outline some of my more memorable encounters with the fair sex. Then we speak briefly of The Secret, and my spirit guide, the wise old man, who embodies the form of Mr. Williams, whom you may recall from chapter one. So...

My problem with women is that, for too long, I have been a slave to the projective tendencies of the soul. Such things are so psychologically obvious to me now, I am embarrassed to make a record of them here. But even from a pre-pubescent age, I would become snagged on the most inaccessible and inappropriate of fantasies. It was not that I lacked courage in approaching women. It was more that I lacked discernment, when even an ounce of common sense would have spared my heartache, and embarrassment. It might even have changed the course of my life but, whether for better or worse, we shall never know.

Of the many examples I can quote, the one that springs to mind right now is when I fell at university for a fellow student called Jacintha. She was a great beauty, but alas, her ambitions were more material than romantic. I thought she would see me for what I was, which was, I hoped, sincere and reliable in my affections – or at least this was the persona I wore in those days. But she saw only my material poverty, and correctly intuited my middling prospects, so landed herself instead a vacuous, self-entitled public schooled posho, who progressed from being a crook, to a minister of state, and from there an even bigger crook, and an alleged Pandemic Profiteer.

Then imagine, by contrast, a rom-com meet-cute in a busy restaurant in Guangzhou, and a woman also too beautiful for words. All places are taken, so she begs a seat at your table. She has not eaten all day, she says, and is fainting with hunger. How else is a man supposed to respond to that? She works for a small, struggling English language newspaper, studied English in the UK. Guangzhou is the edge of the known world for you, a million miles from home, and you are wearing your foreignness like a lantern on your head. She tells you her life-story, gleans snippets of your own, and none of them are true, because you were attentive during your training

and hence you know she is a befriender sent by state security to catch whatever crumbs you are careless enough to drop, also of course to assess your potential for *Kompromat*.

How do you know this? Because she is *interested* in you. And women generally aren't. I am... well, how shall I put it? I don't know what I am. Perhaps women sense that lack of certainty in myself, and mistrust it. Perhaps that is why there is always a Dominatrix in my triad. I want her to tell me who I am, to instruct me in it. Then there is the waitress to serve it, and the witch to seal it with a magic spell.

There are other examples I can quote, a litany of indifferent well-beloveds, and then the state befrienders who batted eyelashes, and hung on my every word. And I suppose it all proved, in the fullness of time, to be a kind of aversion therapy, one that eroded the biological instinct – indeed overcame it in the end, turned me into a kind of secular monk, and not an entirely unwilling one. The sexual act was never a be-all for me, you see? It had always to provide at least the potential for spiritual transcendence. But such exotic tantras are not the lot of most Englishmen. We are better finding another way.

Mai Li, I think she gave her name as. Ah... but she was cute.

More interesting though, as our conversation progressed, I think each of us knew the nature of the game we were playing. It was a subtle double-bluff. We both knew how it went, that we were both acting, so why didn't we just roll with it, and have some fun as well? But that was too dangerous a level of the game for one of my rank to be playing. I merely reported the incident, and was withdrawn to safer territory. The gleaning of my host nation's secrets was not my business, only the analysis of secrets gleaned by others more proficient, and secretive.

But there were secrets of a more personal interest to me, in China. They had first been hinted at in the translations of cultural texts that had been making their way to the west, since the first Opium War. Indeed it was that war whose opening salvos bombarded the very city of Guangzhou – then known as Canton. But to actually *be* in China, I fancied I was close to the source, and I was excited by it, only to discover it was now difficult to discern its traces under a century of cultural modernisations by the redoubtable Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng.

I still dream of Mai Li, though it was thirty years ago. I wonder

if she's still cute.

Anyway, the secret...

It came first out of India, we think, entered China through the high passes of the Himalayas, where it met the same secret going the other way. The twain conferred, agreed on the core issues, differed on the trimmings. They combined forces and went south, to Japan, and from there to the West. It's here then, I have tracked it down, found it hiding in plain sight, the secret of the Great Watcher, yet safe enough for now.

It'll take the collapse of the west before it can reveal itself, beyond the few esoteric groups still party to it, for only then will we have the time, and the need. And collapse is imminent. Anyone who has studied the fall of empires knows this. Whether imminent means a decade or a couple of generations, remains to be seen. And even Rome did not fall completely in a day.

Ah... but this is a fine sunset, a breath of life-giving air to take the hammer of the day's heat away. I hear the cry of distant lambs, the sound of skylarks, and curlew. Early summer on the moors. What time does the pebble eyed man hunt, I wonder? Then of course, there are the doggers who will shortly be assembling in their public sex areas, down by the reservoirs, and along the quiet roads nearby, shagging and smoking pot. Actually, it is after nine now, and a little voice suggests it's time polite society was safely indoors.

Time I left the darkening world once more to the trolls. Indeed, I am minded of a time once, when I walked through Durleston wood at dusk, possessed of a similar anxiety to be indoors, for fear of the more malevolent manifestations of the faery. I came out into the meadow that is now under threat of development, to find Mr Williams, in white jacket, bow tie and trilby hat. He was like an ancient God to me, waiting on the last of the day's sun as it kissed the skyline, beneath the boughs of the leaning oak.

And I felt safe again.

"Now then, young George. Out a bit late, aren't you? Mum and Dad know where you are?"

He had his Voigtländer, loaded with a roll of colour film. There was a proud twinkle in his eye as he told me this. Even as late as the seventies, colour was something only recently affordable for the amateur. What was he doing? He was capturing, he said, the drama and the uniqueness of the sunset.

"We're the only ones to see it quite this way, George. Imagine. This scene, these colours in the sky. A one off. Never to be repeated."

It seemed a remarkable thing – I mean for an apparently ordinary man to be thinking such things at all. But then Mr Williams was no ordinary man, and here I was, safe in the spotlight of this wisdom. He took the shot, then walked me home.

He gave me a print of that sunset, and I still have it.

I shoot the sinking sun now with my phone. I do this in his memory, but it seems an unremarkable thing by comparison, the magic lost by the ease with which it is achieved. Mr Williams and his Voigtländer, and a roll of colour film, shooting the sunset in 1971... this is the equivalent of a man today, capturing the Higgs Boson in a jam-jar, and holding it up for all to see.

"Remarkable, don't you think, George?"

Remarkable, indeed, Mr Williams.

I return to the farm slowly, imagine his company along the way. Thus do the gods protect us at times of need, and abandon us also when we think we need them, but are better to make our own way. But for a time now, as I walk with Mr Williams, the pebble eyed men and the sexual exhibitionists are banished from the world. Of course, quiet old men of solitary habits, fond of cameras, are more likely now to be suspected of deviance, a phenomenon more prevalent in the collective schizophrenic imagination, than in reality. And we reject these wise old men to our detriment, likewise when we reduce our soul images to ladies of easy virtue, we go against nature. Thus the unconscious overwhelms, and renders society retrogressive.

Jasmine is waiting at the gate, as if to see me safely home. She looks afraid for me.

I wonder if Mr. Williams even knew he carried The Secret in his pocket, all those years ago.

Chapter Eleven

Thinking and writing

In which we visit a garden centre for lunch, meet Winona and flirt, of a fashion, or at least in so far as the vast difference in our ages will permit. We encounter the bold symbols of British Nationalism, alive and well, and hanging from the pebble eyed man's house. We consider the hollowness of one's own salvation while witnessing the ruin of everything else, and we meditate upon the philosophy that no one is saved, unless all are saved. Finally, I try to explain why to know The Secret involves more than being merely told of it. So...

When I am not thinking, not writing, I am bored, and on those days I face the years of retirement ahead with something akin to horror. On such days, I feel I am merely biding my time, and might as well be dead, now, than at some unspecified date, later on. The feeling strikes me hard, this midweek morning, as I wander that most bourgeois of British institutions: the garden centre.

I am looking for something to feed my father's roses, because I would not like them to perish on my watch. Of course, a future owner of the property is as likely to rip them out, and start afresh, or – if my neighbour has his way – gravel them over, and park his truck on them. But that is not for me to pre-empt by wanton neglect. I have my duty to perform, and it's irrelevant what comes after I have left this place.

Anyway, there are many old people here. They come for the indifferent cuisine of the cafe, and have dressed up for the occasion. They wear the less flamboyant styles of the nineteen eighties, in every shade of beige and grey. And they shuffle, as if, even when it stands still like this, the world is moving too fast for them to assimilate. In another twenty years or so, I will be one of them, the men indistinguishable from the women, and vice versa. I will be sluggish in mind and limb, hooked hands unable to manipulate or grip, or even touch the wonders of the world without clumsiness, without letting it fall between the cracks of my disintegrating grip on reality.

All right, I might be lucky. I might be one of those spry octogenarians who take up jet-skiing and horse riding. But at this point, things do not look promising.

"Hello again, George."

"Oh... Winona. Hello."

Suddenly I am happy. I am pleased indeed to see a human being who recognises me, who knows my name, who wants to talk, yet wants nothing from me in return. She is wearing green today – green cargo pants, and a baggy green fleece, which bears the garden centre's logo. She is carrying a long-handled wire brush, with which she is removing moss from between the block-paving stones. Just now though, she leans on it and regards me with an impish smile. A fragment of luminous moss is caught in the wondrous tangle of her voluminous hair. I want to reach over and brush it out. I do not, of course, but the feeling puzzles me. When I am eighty and lizard-like in my decrepitude, she will be but forty, and look only slightly different to the way she does now.

"You've given up working at the cafe?"

"No, I work there in the afternoons, work here in the mornings. Then I pull pints at the Pear Tree in the evenings."

Three jobs? What does one say to that? "Em... a busy life you lead. Which job do you prefer?" *Stupid, George. Stupid!*

"Well, they're none of them great."

"I suppose not." *But come now, let's look on the bright side.* "I think I'd quite like working with plants, actually."

"Well me too. But you need a degree in horticulture before they let you touch plants. Me? I just fetch and carry, scrape the weeds and clean the bogs. And touching plants doesn't pay much more than cleaning the bogs, actually. So it's hardly worth the trouble of a degree, and sixty grand in debt, is it?"

"Ah... I suppose not."

"Mine's maths anyway."

"Yours?"

"Degree. And sixty grand of debt. Not that I'll ever pay it off at this rate, so that's one less thing to worry about. And I've no assets, so even when they change the terms and conditions and send the bailiffs round... they're going to be disappointed."

"You have a degree?"

"Don't look so surprised."

She's smiling as she says this, enjoys teasing, and it pleases me she thinks she can trust me not to be offended. Analysis of Winona, George? Incomplete. More data required. But for now she lands on the side of being positively minded, and innocent. And she is not an immediate threat to my peace of mind – except for that momentary

urge to remove the fragment of moss from her hair, which speaks more of a desire to protect, and to nurture, than... well... the other thing...

"I mean, you barely look old enough."

"Oh? How old do you think I look then?"

"I would have said around nineteen."

"Ooh, you're a keeper, you are, George! Add a decade and a bit to that. Won't see thirty again. And still pushing broom and pulling pints. God, I might as well be dead."

"Oh now, don't you start. Just wait till you get to my age."

"Give over. Got years in you yet. How long since you were thirty, then?"

"About as long ago as you've been alive. I'm sorry Winona, I didn't mean to imply I thought you were..."

"What? Too thick to have a degree? Don't worry. Everyone's got a degree now."

"Not everyone has a degree in mathematics."

"Wish I'd not either. It sent me a bit loopy. Barely scraped my finals."

"Still, you look to be managing all right, now. It's tough, I suppose... the jobs market, even for graduates..."

"You've got to have what it takes. And I've not worked that bit out yet. Except, I suspect I haven't got it. What it takes, I mean. For minimum wages, they want you body and soul, seven days a week, permanently plugged in, and you still can't afford a mortgage."

"But you *are* looking, I suppose?"

"Not any more. Seems a bit flaky really. At best I'd just end up in some bullshit job with my nose stuck in a spreadsheet all day, answering emails about emails about emails."

"Yes, well... I must admit that describes most of the latter years of my own career."

"No magic in it, is there? I wouldn't be five minutes before I was off my head again."

"I understand." Indeed I do, but I doubt she thinks so. Still, this is strange, her opening up to me. If I didn't know any better I'd suspect she was a befriender, sent by a hostile state to trick me into indiscretion. But which state might that be, I wonder?

"Anyway," she says, "I'd best get on, or they'll have me for slacking."

"Right you are. Mustn’t let the bastards grind you down."

You really are getting on in years, George, when you mistake a woman in her thirties for a girl of nineteen. Interesting, that fleeting thought about the befriender. How might that be read in the metaphorical sense? She is looking to bring me over to her side? She is trying to learn my secrets? Or betray her own?

I return to Marsh Avenue to find the scar-faced man is not at home, at least judging by the absence of his vehicle, but he has draped a vast, billowing Union Jack on the wall of his house to act, I presume, as his proxy. One might be forgiven for thinking that, through him, the universe is trying hard to find all my triggers. But I have been so long impartially examining the mores of my fellow man, such things do not strike chords with me now. Only the soul does that. Indeed, returning to the business of the flag, I'm wondering only if it will deter potential buyers, should they not be similarly inclined. I'm wondering if that is his intention, ensuring it is not sold to anyone else, that he is to be the only taker. What then?

If I sell, I would like to think of the house going to a young couple, as once my parents were young, that my little bedroom will provide a secure space for the nurturing of another child, as I was nurtured. But that seems inappropriate now, I mean living next-door to the scar faced man, and his innate savagery. But yes, small revelation there. I'm coming around more to the idea of selling, of letting go. And it matters not who gets it. So, I feed the roses, and snip one from a bush whose bud is about to open. I will take it with me, sit it in a small, slim, crystal vase that was my mother's, and I shall put it on the desk at the farm for company.

Come evening now, and I am feeling better for my day out. I break open the laptop to write, and to see which of my thoughts will stick. Unlike my sluggish and somewhat depressive mood this morning, life seems curiously important again, and there is an urgency to engage with it. The moor is bathed in a golden light. It catches the rose in its vase, and gilds its perfection, grants the sense of something once more divine underlying reality.

I have plenty to be grateful for, I know. Still, there is this sense that the pleasure gleaned from my own salvation is always to be muted by my witnessing the disintegration of everything else, and the unnecessary suffering others bring upon themselves. The miraculous might fully reveal itself, and I would be sad others are blind to it, and not a thing I can do to enlighten them – because The

Secret is a thing you cannot know, even when it is told to you.

Which is why I hesitate to tell it.

Have you noticed?

Chapter Twelve

All About the Clicks

In which we learn how the meaning of the world of men is nothing more than click-bait. We speak of metaphysics, and how the significance of an event lies not in its occurrence, but in the subjective emotion it arouses, that what one person considers trivial, another may consider profound. We consider the power of archetypes, and myth, of how stories are often circular. And to take away the bitter taste of all that, dear Jasmine feeds us cottage pie, and seeks to uncover the nature of our former profession. So...

Imagine this: a man suffers a grievous assault. He was out walking, and came across a group of men with dogs. The dogs were tearing a badger apart. I don't know why this is a recurring theme in my narrative, why the universe keeps flagging it up to me, but let's explore it. Yes, it is a terrible thing, this tearing apart of creatures, but cruel men have existed for as long as there have been men. As usual, I pass no judgement, beyond assessing risk to those with whom I am associated.

Anyway, the man asked them to stop, so they beat him. It was a predictable scenario. I am directed by links to photographs, taken by a police surgeon, of the man's injuries. They are shocking. The suspects wore camo, and had with them a pair of lurcher type hounds. By the way, I am reading all of this from the lead story of the Middleton Guardian, our local newspaper, or rather its online derivative – since like most local news, it no longer circulates in paper form.

I am reminded I was once pictured on the front of the Middleton Guardian. It was a much less dramatic event. Marsden C of E Primary School football team had won the district championship. The paper's resident photographer photographed us with our trophy, and a beaming headmaster, whose name I forget. I was not much of a footballer, so occupied the full back position throughout my brief sporting career. I was the last line of defence, little noticed and rarely needed, which, as it turned out, was to be the story of my entire working life. My father kept the cutting. I found it when I was going through his papers. That he was proud of me for this insignificant achievement, I still find deeply moving.

There are two points of interest here. One is that the Middleton

Guardian was once a channel for much lighter happenings in the county borough of Middleton. It chronicled the frivolous, the pointless, and the inconsequential small-town achievements of the innocent and the good. Now it has to do as much as possible with vicious crime. There are also endless adverts, which reduce the salacious content to a juddering, and barely legible experience. The world of men no longer seeks the meaning of itself in metaphysics. Nowadays, it's all about the clicks.

I doubt the world is really any more violent now than it was when I was a child. It is only that our attention is drawn to the violence more, so it sours our vision, and stunts the full flowering of our souls. The difference is that the destructive potential in one man's violent act is much greater, I suppose. He can destroy the world many times over, instead of just the once. And he can hurt a thousand souls by the click of his finger, or an ill-judged comment on Social Media. To be threatened with murder or rape by a stranger, whether they mean it or not, and if they know you or not, is still deeply, deeply damaging to the soul.

And the second thing of interest – if you can remember what we were talking about – is the reference to my being the last line of defence, and for the most part little needed, and how that was reflected in my chosen career. So, if we are still reading the world as metaphor, what am I defending now?

Is my own neighbourhood camo man one of the suspects sought in connection with the fracas? The question is an obvious one to beg. It's clearly a possibility, though I am hardly about to call the police on him, to click the link to the constabulary, and share information. For now, I must do what I have always done. I must glean the intelligence, as and when I am availed of it, and I must analyse.

That my father kept the cutting suggests something else also. It has to do with the significance of apparently insignificant events. And it is this: the event is not ours to judge, though we may be the subject of it. The person for whom the significance arises is no longer with us to explain their reasons, yet it was important to them, and perhaps not so much the event in question, but the feeling it arouses in both their definition and recognition of something innocent and good. And good need not be writ large across the sky. Indeed, it rarely is. As for innocence, it is only asking at some not too distant point in life, to be shat upon, and is

therefore heart-breakingly transient.

Anyway, the weather turns inclement, and for several days I allow myself to be confined to the farm. I make extensive use of the microwave in the communal kitchen, rise late for breakfast, and prepare my evening meals early, so as to minimise the chance of social contact. I am in contemplative mood, waking up perhaps to a sense of story, and my place in it. I had thought the very core of it had had the pages torn out. I had thought to reconnect with the foundation of my childhood, only to discover it was no longer there. But no matter where we fetch up in life, we place a finger on the page, and so long as there is a breath left in us, the story starts afresh from there.

For all of my evasiveness, my creeping about the house, my keeping to my room, I am unable to evade Jasmine for long. She is curious about me, as being the new boy in the house. I understand this, it being her roof, and the need to know who is under it, if they be a true friend or foe, no matter how friendly they seem. She chides me for the use of ready-meals, sits me down one evening with cottage pie, produces also a glass of potent red wine, perhaps to loosen my tongue, which it does not. Thus cunningly equipped, she makes subtle enquiries of the nature of my former work for the civil service. True to my code, and even with a belly full of red wine, I am tangentially opaque, and learn more about her than she about me.

She explores other terrain, establishes I am not married, and have no children, that I do not bat for the other side, as they used to say. And then, have I met our professional lady yet? Ah! She is playing cupid. She sees the professional lady, and I as well suited companions, perhaps. I tell her I believe I have indeed met the lady, and recount the tale of my dinner with Cerise and Milo. I tell her it is a Ms Elaine Dodds who is seeing to the legal matters pertaining to my late father's estate. But I have yet to establish if it is the same Ms Elaine Dodds as the one who also has rooms here.

"And if it is the same, George?"

"Well, it would be a little awkward, Jasmine."

"Why so?"

"Well, I have never lived, or rather laid my head, in close proximity to colleagues, or business associates. I like to keep a distance between business and personal matters."

She finds my delicacy amusing. "I'm sure that's very sensible,

George."

Or perhaps she merely thinks me shy. That's fine. Indeed that has always been a good story to hide oneself in. She is perhaps ten years older than me, which makes her hardly old enough to be my mother. But she has spent a lifetime facing both the balminess, and the ferocity of nature. She is very much of the earth, then, and for a time at least, I am nurtured in the womb of this, her lone farm, on the edge of the peaceful green. This makes her rather more than a hill farmer – as noble a profession as that might be. No, Jasmine is now promoted to something elemental, mythical. She is indeed the creative aspect of the archetypal mother.

And the father? There must be a father to balance the equation, you see? I wonder. He is a destructive tyrant. He is corrupt and divorced from the greater reality. He is laying waste to the world. This is not my actual father, you understand. Again I'm speaking metaphorically, mythologically, archetypally. My actual father was a creative man, and very kind. He wanted to understand more of the world, but his circumstances hampered him. He calculated early on he would do better to nurture the next generation, let them complete the task he had set himself. I suppose I would have done the same had I become a father. Alone, and childless, I have no excuses, except of course, I am no better at it than he. So... the *mythological* father? He is the State, overseeing society, nurturing its children, or rather abusing them by its wanton neglect.

All right, so, I have identified some openings, now, some ways into the puzzle. I have noted how the routes map themselves as stories. And the stories are cyclical, as they are the same, each story ending where it began. And each cycle of storytelling begins at whatever point we wake up to the fact a story is being told in the first place.

And my story?

Well, where to begin...

Chapter Thirteen

The Fool, the Magician and the High Priestess

In which we consider what kind of story we are telling, how it relates to The Secret and how we can tell if The Secret is true. We speak of magicians, and fools, and priestesses, and how the world is never quite as we perceive it to be. We speak of Zen, and then we meet the most powerful and dangerous of our characters thus far, more dangerous than an army of pebble eyed men. Her name is Tamara. So,...

My story, of course, like anyone else's, is the story of the fool. The fool is innocent in setting out on his journey, like that picture of me as a kid, in the newspaper. But the fool has to be innocent, ignorant of the hurdles ahead, for no one would have the courage to attempt the journey otherwise.

The journey is a circular one, and not just one circle either. Rather, it consists of several laps, covering similar psychical ground. This much I can say from my own experience. Round and round we go, and along the way we encounter the archetypes, which we can liken to fictional characters. The way we deal with them determines our progress, and the number of circles we make, over the course of our lives, brings us by degrees closer to something at the centre of ourselves.

It is a spiral then, a knowledge of something, an awareness perhaps. I can't say what, though it is related to The Secret. Indeed, it is the key to The Secret. The Secret itself is nothing, you see? Like good intelligence, anyone can tell it to you, but there is a world of difference between knowing it, and knowing it to be *true*. For that you need the key, and to find the key, you have to make the journey.

The earliest of the archetypes are known, in some esoteric circles at least, as the Magician and the High Priestess. Both are manifestations of the psyche, you understand? They exist inside our heads, but they have reflections in the visible world, which is how we know they're active in that greater reality within us. And that reality within us is the only reality. You don't believe that? Neither do I. That's because neither of us have completed our journey.

I have known magicians, and in some respects have become one myself, at least in so far as I no longer look to the material world for answers to questions of being. The Fool and the Magician go

hand in hand, the one shadowing the other, the Fool returning whenever the Magician overreaches himself.

I first became a magician in Kyoto. I would have been about forty years old then, an auspicious age. The Ego is weary. The world makes no sense. Other voices break through. There is a Zen garden in Kyoto, at a place called the Temple of the Peaceful Dragon. It consists of rocks and raked gravel and moss, and is said to be five hundred years old. Wherever you stand in the garden, you can count fourteen rocks. But if you could float above it, you would see there are fifteen. So, from the normal way of looking at things, one of the rocks is always hidden. It begs the question: how many rocks are there?

There is more to the garden, I'm sure, but the business about the rocks is the thing that struck me most at the time. I am a western man, steeped in his rational traditions, while Zen is a world of paradox and seeming nonsense that denies reality, or at least as we think we understand it to be. To travel this road, even a little, one must become a magician. And then one realises reality is very much dependent upon one's perspective. Where the magician falls down is in his reliance upon the intellect, on the conscious faculties of mind. Therefore if he is wise he seeks the counsel of the High Priestess.

The High Priestess has the power to alter her perspective, and therefore his, since she is a part of him. She can withdraw from the daylight world, from the glare of the sun-god, who blinds us. She can move in the dark of the unconscious mind. Her magic is of the night, and of the moon, and her stories are strange. The ego says there are fourteen stones. The High Priestess says, are you sure? So Ego says all right, there are fifteen. The High Priestess says, are you sure?

Winona is perhaps a projection of the priestess – I can see that – but that she is so young suggests my own priestess has been ignored for so long, she has regressed to youth and inexperience. And it's true, I no longer dream of her as I once did. I am no longer sure about the story of the stones.

All right, so my introspective confinement at the farm has yielded this one insight, albeit one of doubt. I wonder if perhaps I had secretly been wishing to begin the part of my story that includes an unrequited longing for Ms Elaine Dodds. It may have begun already, I don't know. We do not meet, and now I feel the need for distraction.

As if in answer, I note the artificial intelligence of online advertising intuits I should be interested in a concert of classical music. It is to be performed at the town hall in Middleton, no less. I'm not sure it intuits correctly, however. My classical music phase began in my later teens and lasted through to my middle thirties, which meant I missed out on much that was otherwise musically innovative, in the nineteen nineties, though that genre involved electric guitars and drums. However, I did frequent Middleton Town Hall for concerts, delivered by whatever itinerant chamber orchestra happened to be passing. So, although no longer as enamoured of the classical as I was, this presents itself as another opportunity to find a fragment of foundation remaining from my younger days. The Magician therefore turns archaeologist, brushing off the sedimentary layers from his own foundations.

Change of scene, then, and here I am, sitting on a hard chair, in the ballroom of Middleton's Italianate town hall. Thirty years have dissolved to nothing, though I am as yet to be visited by a revelation. I am listening to Vivaldi. *Le Quattro Stagioni*. I was once fond of this concerto, but find myself now craving something more like a wall of sweetly aromatic noise by Slowdive.

Vivaldi? A priest by profession, I recall. The music was a sideline. He rescued young women from prostitution, formed them into an orchestra, and wrote music for them to play to the Venetian elites. I wonder if there's anything here I should be paying attention to. Poverty, suffering and vile exploitation? Most people don't care, including the political, the corporate media, professional, and intellectual classes. But as Vivaldi shows us, one good man can make a difference, albeit small, by putting his own house in order.

Anyway, Vivaldi takes us now to the interval, when tea, nibbles, and warm white wine are served. Bach is to follow. I do not relish Bach. Neither do I partake of refreshment, as there is rather a crush, and I'm not overly fond of beverages served in plastic. Instead I sit and wonder why I feel so unenlightened. Is it the acoustics? The town hall was always ill-regarded in its dance-hall days as ringing rather flat, or so my parents would complain, long after its dance-hall days were over. There was never a band that could lift it, they'd say.

"What do you think of it all so far, then?"

"Hmm?"

Ah... a female.

She is leaning over the back of the empty chair beside me. Well, this is novel, and somewhat contrived. I mean, it never happens in real life, does it? A man might try it on with a lone woman this way, and she might make polite noises, then make an excuse and disappear. It never happens the other way round, like this. I mean, "woman tries it on with a man".

Is she trying it on, though, George? Is she not just being polite?

No. There are many aspects of my training that are still intact, and this woman is a befriender, if ever I saw one. Or worse...

In which case: shit.

Or is it that I have dressed older than my years? Picture me now, in tweed and a bow tie. I am like a professor of mathematics, from a century ago, and have added a decade to my years at least. I am hoping others will think me strange, and avoid contact. Have I overdone it, to the extent women now think me harmless enough to approach? Do they take pity on me? Do they wish to mother me, in that way younger women like to mother older men, men who are of an age at which the women no longer need worry about their penises.

No, George. I fear you were right at the first glance. We must tread carefully here. Alarm bells are ringing.

"The show so far?" she says. "What do you think?"

She is smartly dressed, as if for one of those forties dance hall dos – hair and all. She is not young, though a good deal younger than me. I detect a quirky spirit, something pointed in her eye as she regards me. Do I imagine it, or are we both impostors? Are we both clothed stupidly, in order to deflect interest? Yes, she is from the nineteen forties – dress, stockings... is that a thing now? I wonder. I'm so out of touch with fashion.

"I'm afraid I'm finding it a bit dreary," I tell her.

"Oh? Afraid? Why *afraid*?"

Indeed why so, George? Good question. "Well, I've always avoided the risk of giving offence by unnecessary candour. I'm sure others are enjoying it, and I wouldn't want to spoil their pleasure by mentioning my own lack of it. It's probably just me, today, you know? One of those days."

Circumlocutious in the extreme, George. If she persists after that, her cover is well and truly blown.

"Want to get out of here, then?" she asks.

There we go. What now George? "All right."

No, really, she actually said that. And I jumped at it. So much for caution, eh?

So we rise as one. She is tall, upright in stature, something preposterously "noir" about her. What movie is she from? I have seen that pose before. Was it in Casablanca? Is she Ingrid Bergman, then? No. The movie is Gilda, perhaps? Then she is Rita Hayworth? No, no... this has something more of a Philip Marlowe about it. The Maltese Falcon perhaps? She is Lauren Bacall then? *Here's looking at you, Kid*. No... I don't mean this literally, okay? I mean nothing *literally*. I am merely groping for the archetype. But if this is true, there is a Peter Lorre and a Sydney Greenstreet in here somewhere, and I relish the prospect of neither, for therein lies also a thing malign.

Wait, wait. I'm, getting confused. Bogart played Sam Spade in the Falcon. And the woman?... That was... who was it?... Heavens, that was Mary Astor...

And the Falcon? A McGuffin. Beware the McGuffin! Beware also the appearance of a Peter Lorre and a Sydney Greenstreet!

By now I am outside the town hall, feeling a little nonplussed to be suddenly in the company of so glamorous a woman. Mary Astor, Lauren Bacall, Rita Hayworth, Ingrid Bergman. A composite, perhaps? Common factor: Actress. I'm also stumped. I mean... what now?

Once upon a time Middleton would have possessed alternative entertainments. There were cinemas, bars, even a nightclub in the long ago. Now it is purely drinking dens of a lower sort, and shuttered shops and wind-blown swirls of litter sticking to pools of vomit. It is hardly the place for bow ties and silks. I'm hoping that's not what she has in mind, and I am loath to suggest it myself.

"If I may say," I say, "you look amazing. Like a movie star."

"You may so say, sir. And thank you."

"Is it a fashion now, that Hollywood golden-years look?"

"I don't know," she says. "Surely nowadays anything goes. I mean, look at you."

"Ah... yes. But I thought to look a little last century in order to deter casual conversation with strangers."

"Didn't work with me though, did it?"

"Well no..."

She is definitely some sort of befriender. That's what one would normally suspect under the circumstances, were one operating in a

hostile environment – or if not so much hostile, then at least data-fluid, as we used to say. Is that what England has become now? Hostile, or fluid? Or both?

"So... I'm George by the way."

"Pleased to meet you, George. I'm Tamara."

"Tell me, Tamara, where do grown-ups go in Middleton, at this hour, for entertainment. I've been away a long time you see, and I find the old place somewhat on its uppers."

"Well, I suspect they leave it and go elsewhere, George."

"Indeed, I suspect you're right. That's exactly what grown-ups would do. Is that what we should do, do you think?"

"I think we should. Would you like to go to a party?"

"Do you have a particular party in mind?"

"I ducked one earlier because I didn't have a date, but I'd really like to go. Will you be my date, George?"

"What sort of party would that be?"

"A country house party. Free drinks and conversation in posh surroundings, with like-minded people dressed as if they don't care what century this is. You'll fit right in."

"That sounds very pleasant. In which case, I'd be delighted to stand in as your date, Tamara."

Delightful, yes, but not necessarily wise, George. Still, under the circumstances, what else can one do?

Chapter Fourteen

The Hierophant

In which we meet the arbiters of consensus, those who decide if we are disciple or heretic, and we are reminded they are a mixed bunch, though tending, these days, towards people of low character, which is inevitable, given the rules of the game we play. And we meet a ghost from The Service, who is less than pleased to see us. So...

She offers to drive me to the party, but I'm not foolish enough to get into a car with her. Instead, I follow, one eye on the rear-view, in case of ambush, though I'm damned if I'd know what to do about it, if I were – ambushed, that is. She drives a mustard coloured Porsche, from the last century, and she drives it sensibly, which has me wondering if it's actually hers, or if she's merely borrowed it for the occasion. Otherwise, the car would be one indicator of wealth, another is the Lady Oyster she wears, again of a somewhat vintage style, suggestive of old, rather than new money, which, these days has a tendency towards vulgarity. No point having money these days if it's so understated no one knows you have it. But then again, I do not know if this is the real Tamara, or merely the image she wishes to portray.

We head west, along country lanes. It's a while since I've been out this way, and am both surprised and dismayed to be passing the once quaint public houses that dotted the nooks and crannies of my youth, and which fell to ruin during the pandemic years, and the following crash. Some are still boarded, some demolished. It seems all the more unlikely there could be any really grand country houses left here, all the serious capital having long ago drained south. But they do exist still, having changed hands from the old families, who had kept them for generations on the backs of the working classes, and, it has to be said, slaves also.

Some are now the fortified dens of untouchable organised crime families, who run multifarious rackets in Manchester and Liverpool. They also keep slaves, though rather more discreetly than did the doyens of Empire. Another property I know to be the ostentatious pile of a notorious slum-landlord, straight out of a Dickens novel. Others have gone for care homes, voracious enterprises which strip their inmates of life-savings at the rate of a grand per week, in return for appalling treatment. I prefer not to think of myself ending

up in one of those and, being a man of comfortable means, have taken the necessary precautions. Again, all of this is inevitable, given the rules of the game.

So, finally, we come to the unassuming gates of Morton House. It is backed by rather a gloomy looking forest, though the presence of wealth is somewhat given away by a bristling of security cameras, and a rolling electric gate. If I remember my local history correctly, this was once home to the Mason-Leighs, mill owners, and magnates in sanitary-ware, as they used to call the makers of toilets and hand-basins in the long ago. And indeed, they are long gone, of course. The present owner is one Joshua Malone, former chancer and barrow boy, now Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

It is alleged Sir Joshua gained his fortune, his title, and much more besides, in the pandemic, virtue of governmental contacts, and lucrative no-bid contracts, for protective equipment, which failed to yield so much as a single stitch of kit. Such things as went on in those benighted times were often the subject of raised eyebrows, at least in the more liberal presses, though the enquiry – still ongoing – is expected to exonerate all concerned, when it concludes in the long grass of a not too near future. This, however, does not forbid entry into the lush pages of the flagship County magazines, which politely gloss over Malone's shadows, in exchange for permission to photograph his emblems of opulence.

Such was the lie of the land anyway, when I last had access to official intelligence on such matters. Corporate, national journalism is of course rather a poor substitute, so one must look to the independent media for a more insightful analysis. Also the anonymous blogs of former servants, such as myself, do take up the slack somewhat, if one knows where to look – separate the wheat from the conspiratorial chaff, so to speak.

None of this matters really, and I have no opinions on the rights or the wrongs of it. I simply like to tap the barometer now and then, and keep a weather eye. I surmise things have not been set fair for a long time, that there are greater storms to come, the likes of which you cannot imagine. But then you have only to look to history to remind yourselves of how great the damage might be, if you can but imagine yourselves cured of your English exceptionalism.

Anyway, I follow Tamara along the driveway. It is scrunchy

gravel, edged with clipped box hedge. The original old pile had fallen into disrepair, and was demolished, to be replaced with rather a more modern abode, no less palatial, though a good deal less tasteful and somewhat carbuncular. By her confidence, she gives the impression of it not being the first time she has visited. It should of course worry me I am the convenient date of a woman who moves in these circles, but in truth I am not moving in the real world at all this evening. I am chasing shadows in the underworld. I am defining the archetypes that haunt me, then I might better know myself, and my position in the spiral of my life.

Or something like that.

We are greeted in the hallway by a chorus of cheers from several ladies of the horsey sort, to whom Tamara genuflects in good humour. I am introduced casually: "Oh, this is George, by the way."

George greets the welcoming party with smiles and a respectful tilt of the head. Notwithstanding my senior years, I pass muster as Tamara's date, therefore betray neither of us, and am dismissed to the background, but have apparently gained my "in" to this particular branch of the county set. And it's quite a crowd, well heeled of course. As we mingle, and as promised by Tamara, I find I am no longer eccentrically dressed. I recognise local politicians, councillors of both affiliation, and none. I recognise a scrap-metal billionaire, with Russian connections, suspected of serious malfeasance, including the serial murder of underworld rivals, but of use, for now, to the security apparatus, and therefore strutting proudly in his peacock suit, to be fawned upon by all and sundry.

Tamara steers me in the direction of the host. "Sir Josh... yes I came, I know. Silly me. This is George, by the way."

Peter Lorre, I mean... *Joshua Malone* (KBE) is impressively casual in chinos and a loud check jacket. He looks rather like a Hollywood depiction of a seventies mobster, including the large framed, yellow-tinted spectacles. He doesn't know me, so makes a passing judgement, finds me harmless, takes possession of me for a moment, something not altogether friendly about his arm around my shoulder. It is patronising, possessive, oppressive. Of all the things he knows, or might not know, he knows I am not really Tamara's date.

"Welcome George, let's find you something to drink, eh? You look like a whisky man. Am I right?" He steers me to another room, where I am furnished with whiskey. By now Tamara has melted

away. This is not a surprise. The real purpose for my presence here is about to reveal itself as I am passed from pillar to post. I only hope there is as little beating about the bush as possible.

"Clive," he says. "Come and meet George."

Ah. There is to be only a little beating of the bush, enough for appearances, that's all. And then, here we are. Sydney Greenstreet... *Clive* is a sour faced, and sober-tweeded gentleman, nearing seventy now. I know him, and he knows me, but we pretend we don't, and make polite noises. Malone leaves us, and circulates.

"So, George, what line are you in, old boy?"

"I'm retired Clive," as well he knows, having been the one who retired me. "Have been for some time, now. I was in the civil service, actually. Man and boy."

"Ah, not what it was of course. Utter shambles these days, I'm told."

"And you, Clive? Your line?"

"Oh, this and that, you know?"

"Still... em... working, then?"

"Oh absolutely, old boy. Drop dead if I stopped. So how are you finding it? Retirement, I mean."

"It suits me very well, thank you."

Clive Martland was what you might call my line-manager, at least as near as one can describe such things, in my former profession. He oversaw my deployments, and it was to him I reported, though I suspect my reports and analyses were read infrequently, or at least I am not aware any were ever acted upon with great urgency. So now, having convinced the room we have only just met, Clive passes me on to a highly polished twit called Rory, whose only subjects of conversation are golf, and horses.

This is sleight of hand. The purpose of the evening is to meet and to speak with Clive, but only after bona-fides have been established, and footprints in the sand erased. I listen to this twitish posho politely, then do what I have always been good at: I vanish into the wallpaper and make for the exit. This seems the most circumspect course, though I do not believe I shall be allowed to actually escape. I am merely testing the water, so to speak. Sure enough I am headed off at the door by a theatrically breathless and apologetic Tamara.

"George, *darling*, I'm neglecting you. Do you forgive?"

"How could one not, Tamara?" She really is the most charming

actress. Without due caution, a man might easily fall in love with her, as I'm sure many have.

"Really, I *am* sorry. Just had to nip to the loo. You weren't actually going to sneak off and leave me here, were you? Is the party so utterly boring, darling?"

"I'm sure you don't need a chaperone."

"Oh but that's what I *do* need. That man you were just talking to,..."

"Who? Rory?"

"It's *so* embarrassing. I'm old enough to be his mother of course."

"Surely not, Tamara. You don't look a day over thirty."

"Oh, go on. You old rogue."

More smoke and mirrors. I am in the company of politicians, and crooks, and spies. The intrigue is of no interest. All I want to know is does the situation represent a threat, or can I view it with the bemusement it deserves? Here, this private, and not altogether seemly milieu, has become the seat of local governance. All else, and by which I mean that which lies beyond the security perimeter – that being you and me, and to a large extent also the law, and our being at odds with it – is to be viewed with suspicion, and somehow circumvented, and not always in a subtle manner. It is a picture repeated county by county, now, all the way down the road to old London town. It's in places like this these days it is decided who shall govern, who shall be rich, and who shall be poor.

I'm not sure if this answers any of the questions you have regarding the state we're in, or if indeed you are by now so oppressed you no longer care to talk about it. As for me, I realise I am in the presence of the Hierophant. This is the archetype, if you like, the figure who represents that which is deemed to be most holy. Be it wholesome, or corrupt, this holy thing, only the group decides, decides also who is *in* and who is *out*, who is *conformist*, and who is the *heretic*.

In the presence of the Hierophant, the Fool must use his judgement, tread lightly and ask himself this question: *do I fear to tell the truth?* For the truth shall surely damn me, and the only safety lies in... well... lies. And here I am lying, along with the rest of them, pretending this is one thing, when it is something else entirely.

Malone makes another appearance, a torpedo from the depths. "Ah, George... there you are."

"Sir Josh." I note he beams a little when addressed thus. Clearly the shine is not yet gone from it.

"I believe Clive was looking for you," he says.

"Really?"

"He wanted to ask you something. Tam, why not show George up to the study. I think I last saw Clive in there. He was half asleep. Past his bedtime. Check up on him, would you mind?"

Suggested narrative, cast within earshot: Clive is a doddery old fool, can't handle his drink, shouldn't be allowed out on his own. That would be a dangerous mistake to make, and I am tempted to take offence at it. His belt carries many scalps, and the thing with Clive is you never see him coming. So, anyway, second floor, small turreted wing, overlooking gardens, now fading into dusk. Clive is sitting by the window very much awake, and perfectly sober. Tamara says she'll leave us to our boring man-talk.

"Catch up with you later, darling."

She bestows upon me the grace of an air-kiss. Clive does not acknowledge her, nor, I note, does she expect him to. He gestures to the chair opposite. I sit. He takes a breath. Then we get to it: "What the hell are you doing here, George?"

Chapter Fifteen

The return of magic

In which we discover there is a conspiracy afoot. While this may excite you, it is tiresome for me, as it distracts us from our purpose. But it also threatens to bring harm on Winona, and for this reason we are persuaded back into a kind of service for, well... The Service. We do not yet learn the nature of the conspiracy, only sense its gravity and attendant dangers. And most interesting of all, we discover the gods of reason are false gods, because they are still afraid of magic. So...

"What am I doing here? Well... I rather thought you'd invited me, Clive. At least, I assumed it was not my old world charms, or my timeless good looks that had Tamara kidnapping me in broad daylight."

Who is talking, please? Yes... I used to speak this way. I used to deal with all the suave, slippery bastards by kicking back and adopting the same convoluted, and pretentious diction. It is a language, on the surface polite, even charming, but underneath it is hung with barbs and dripping with poison. I would make a parody of it by clinging also to my northern vowels, unlike many of my fellow countrymen who venture south, and are ever so keen to ditch them.

"I mean," says Clive, "what are you doing in this part of the world?"

"I live here, Clive."

"No you don't. You live in Harpenden. Have done since you joined the service."

"You've not been very well briefed, then. I sold that place when I retired, swapped it for a houseboat on the Shropshire Union Canal. What is it about Englishmen and boats, eh? Anyway, it's probably sunk by now. Buggered if I can remember where I left it, actually. I was moving it gradually north. But then my father died, and I have his affairs to settle. Including his house. Do I sell it, or do I live in it? In truth I don't know, but right now I'm favouring the former, while renting rooms in an old farm, up on the moors. Sorry... that's not a very succinct answer, is it? And probably not the one you wanted to hear. But, well, to answer your question, that's why I'm here, actually. But life is complicated, so all answers regarding it must also, by necessity, be convoluted, and complicated."

"What's your interest in Rick Etty Homes?"

Ah. Interesting come-back. Most unexpected, that. Answer: "None whatsoever, Clive. Why do you ask, old boy?"

"Heard of 'em though?"

"Who hasn't? Chairman... forget his name. Damn. I would have known it once. Memory's not what it was. Again, why do you ask?"

Answering questions with questions? Be careful George; Clive is the master at that game. We could be here all night, and neither of us will learn anything.

"When did you hear of them, *most recently*, I mean."

"Well, I know they're pushing a big development on the greenbelt between Middleton and Marsden."

"Who told you that?"

"They did. They've stuck a big notice up on the land in question. It's impossible to miss, and hardly a secret. There's a walk I've been doing round there since I was a boy. It does rather spoil the view – though not as much as it will when they've built all those houses."

"So you've no involvement then?"

"With the development? Not at all. Really, I'm not the person I was – as you well know. I couldn't do a day's work again, let alone work at a corporate level for a big outfit like that. I don't follow. What exactly are you getting at?"

"What I'm trying to get at is what do you think about it?"

"The development?"

"Yes, the *development*."

"Well, it's an abomination of course. I can't say I approve of it, and neither does the council. My impartial analysis says they'll be ground down eventually. Pressure from London and all that. It's the usual way in these cases, isn't it?"

"Then you oppose it?"

"Oppose? Well, not in any concrete sense. By that I mean – you know – waving placards in Middleton high-street. No, I said it's an abomination, and I don't *approve* of it, but I surmise any actual *opposition* to it would be futile, as well as illegal these days, and subject to incarceration, not that I'm aware of any *actual* organised opposition, you understand."

"You sure about that? What about the woman?"

"Who, Tamara? Please, my intuition isn't what it was. You must be more specific. I only met Tamara this evening, and I rather assumed it was you who sent her to get me."

"Not Tamara. Forget Tamara. I mean the woman you met in the woods. She wrote a coded message for you. Hung it in the tree. You were seen picking it up."

"My... those woods have been busy. Or are there cameras in the trees? Have they got private security watching? Have you? Heavens. So... there's an intrigue here,..."

"You don't deny it?"

"Deny what, Clive? I'm sorry, I keep telling you you're not dealing with the George Swift I used to be. Swift, I am not. Not any more."

He takes a breath. That he doubts what I've just said is flattering. "I *mean*... that the woman in the woods has been passing messages to you. Do you deny it?"

"Ah... clarity at last! So, we're talking about Winona. I don't know her last name. I presume you do. I don't know her terribly well. I've seen her a few times. She serves coffee in town, works at a garden centre, and at a public house, but can still barely scrape the pennies together for rent. That's as much as I know about her. Analysis: the hours she works I'd be surprised if she had time to organise a tea party, let alone a robust resistance against corporate developers. But you already know this, I presume. My assessment of Winona? Let me see. She's intelligent, articulate, but like many of her generation has lapsed into escapism and fantasy."

"The message, George. What was the message about?"

"There was no message, Clive. She'd hung things in the trees. I was curious. They weren't exactly hidden. I photographed them. Runic, of a sort. I thought I might have a go at deciphering them. As near as I can tell they were charms, spells. She's a witch, Clive. The girl walks with fairies and elves. She might even have pointy ears herself for all I know. She's appalled the community might lose those meadows, but her opposition boils down to nothing more than hexing. As for us being in cahoots, secret messages and all that? A bit amateurish, don't you think? I know I've been out of the business a while, and it never really was my business – I mean that side of things – but I'm sure I could have come up with something better than that, if we were planning on taking down the likes of Rick Etty Homes."

"What did it say?"

"What did what say?"

"The message."

"I couldn't read it. Not my strong point, as I recall you once took pleasure in pointing out. I presume you passed it on to the cipher clerks? What did they make of it?"

But Clive is still not answering questions. He never did. I have known him for thirty years, remember him as a younger man, ambitious, but not without a sense of humour in the early days. His humour, however, seems to have fled as the lines on his face have spread and deepened, so now he seems only to frown, even, I presume, when he is smiling. He should have retired a decade ago, but he's not the sort who would know what to do with himself, any more, it seems, than I do. But at least I'm trying to apply myself to a different mode of being.

He thinks a while, then nods. He believes me, then? He always did seem to trust me, as much as one trusts anyone in this business, or rather he never credited me with the wit to lie convincingly. "Coincidence, your turning up, George, that's all. Raised some eyebrows."

"So it would seem."

"Favour from you, then?"

Ah, at last. Here comes the punch-line. "Of course, Clive."

"Stop her from interfering."

"Winona? She's hardly interfering. Like I said, it's spells and hexes, and... I don't know... intention... that sort of thing."

"It's the intention that will get her into trouble. Deal with her, or others will."

"I didn't mean that sort of intention, Clive. These are esoteric traditions." I'm tempted to add: 'as well you know'. But then I'm not sure if he knows I know he knows, I mean, by virtue of his membership of several lodges of the Masonic sort, and others besides, all of which are steeped in the esoteric – though not so far as I know, in the magical arts. No, I never took Clive for an *actual* magician. Just someone who occasionally dressed up as one.

"Em... they believe they can influence outcomes by thinking about them, meditating upon them. She's young, idealistic, inspired. We were like that once, remember? Honestly, she's a lone voice and harmless, unless we're all so paranoid now we're afraid of witches. You'd really send the bone breakers after her for that?"

This seems to touch a nerve. "Not me, not... *us*. You've seen who's here tonight. These are the people we're in bed with, now. Always have been, in a way."

"Yes, though I remember a time when we were on top, Clive, and it was perfectly clear who was fucking whom. Anyway. If that's all, I'll be on my way. This house has a bad smell. It's upsetting my stomach."

He flicks his hand towards the door. He's said his piece. I am dismissed. He's satisfied I have not gone rogue, that I am not working against the State. But it seems the State is twitchy enough over the matter to suspect I was, and that Winona still might be.

"I wish I could say I was pleased to see you, Clive. And I am, I suppose, though in the latter years of our acquaintance, you turned into a frightful old curmudgeon, and I see it's an affectation you've continued to nurture."

Is that a twitch of the face? a possible attempt at a smile? "Mind how you go," he says. "But keep her out of trouble. Keep her *safe*. This is about more than a few square miles of greenbelt. The repercussions of what's going on here will be felt for decades, centuries even, long after we're gone, George. Understand?"

Understand? Of course I don't. But that's not the point. The point is I am not to develop an interest, and that suits me. What's going on here doesn't matter. It is a McGuffin. It is a misdirection. It distracts us from our purpose, which is The Secret above all secrets. And we had better tread carefully. But one thing disturbs me: Clive never ventures out of London, unless it is via Heathrow for overseas destinations. Clive does not travel "north". Yet here he is, and if I boil our conversation down to its legible constituents, his purpose, having confirmed my presence in the midst of his intrigue is purely coincidental, it is to now have me throw protective wings around this girl, the witch, Winona, while the big boys make large over, well... something else... whatever *this* is.

But George does not protest. He goes quietly. More to the point, this time, he goes unchallenged. He finds his car where he left it. Tamara is waiting there, as if to guard it, leaning upon it, while smoking a cigarette. He unlocks it with the remote, and she pulls the door open for him. Stiff little smile. The pretence has fallen from her. No longer the Mary Astor act. She throws down the butt, stubs it into sparks with her toe. Very noir.

"Didn't fool you for a minute, did I?" she says.

"No, but you were sweet, Tamara. And thank you."

For what I am grateful, exactly, I'm not entirely sure. It was the performance, I suppose, the bubble and the froth of it. She could

have played it much darker.

She blows a kiss, which I fail to catch. Strangely, I sense there is some mutual feeling there, though what its precise nature, I'm too tired to puzzle with now. Or perhaps it's not so strange as all that. I fancy she is trapped in the game, dazzled by its baubles, and can find no way out of it. Or am I only speaking of myself?

How long have I been away from their world? It must be longer than I thought, sufficient at least to have become another person in the meantime. The developer, the meadow, the glittering intrigue behind it? No, there's a deeper issue here, that when the world has lost its bearings so much, when it is mired so much in all that is corrupt, when there is a revolving door between organised criminality, corporate governance, the media, and political shenanigans, when that world fears the return of magic, *real magic*, how long before we are so benighted, we are burning witches again?

Chapter Sixteen

The Fool and the Hermit

In which, we speak at last of the Tarot, and other esoteric matters. We speak of Winona, a woman who, half our lifetime ago, we would have wanted for a lover, yet whose ease in our company now speaks only of the sexual safety of generational difference. Yet I am to protect her, because I love her, but in what way? As muse? As daughter? But first, we must find her. What is this love between an older man, and a too younger girl? Is it spiritual? And finally, finally, I sit down with the mystery that is Ms. Elaine Dodds. So...

I don't know what else to call these chapters. Yes, clearly I am referencing the Tarot, for now, an esoteric system favoured by everyone from fortune tellers to adepts of the Golden Dawn. Equally as many who favour it, are terrified by it. I merely find it useful.

I became acquainted with it in Florence, first as a card game, then as a story-telling device. The man who taught me was another magician, an alchemist. He sought immortality through the stories the cards told him. You turn the cards, certain characters pop up and, knowing their nature, you must weave a myth from them.

A myth is not a false story, it is not an ancient fiction, nor is it a lie. It is a pattern that repeats throughout time and must be lived. But to be lived it must be understood, and therein lies our problem. Not only do we no longer understand our myths, we are forgetting their existence. Yet each of us is living a myth, probably several myths at the same time. We can't help but act them out, because that's what human beings do. We are the embodiment of myths. It's just that the myth we are in is the hardest of all to see, and perhaps that's just the way it has to be, to stop us from spoiling the ending. But what if the myth is a tragedy? Why would we willingly see that through to its conclusion, if we could avoid it? Otherwise, what are we for?

As a clue, whatever resonates with the psyche is a clue to the fix we're in, which characters are pulling our strings. It's a way of thinking outside of our normal frame of reference, of seeing what we've otherwise blinded ourselves to. The cards help in this respect. They help in uncovering the currents of the secret beyond all secrets. This is not to say they always work and, like any system, it is better not followed too slavishly. However, I wonder, given

Winona's esoteric credentials, if she is not also familiar with it, and I might therefore use it as a device to bring us into closer acquaintance.

Careful though. I don't mean anything untoward by this. She is half my age, and has considerably more future ahead of her. It would not be decent, therefore, to seek to persuade her to spend much of that future invested in me. But I do take Clive's warnings seriously, and would not like any harm to come to her. Violence is so terribly casual these days, easily subcontracted, and the act of it undertaken so far down the chain of command, those ordering it can easily absolve themselves by cleverness with words.

But how I am to protect her is anyone's guess. I suppose it would be advantageous first to understand the lie of the land, and whether her intentions do involve anything like direct action, or organising and inciting others into protest against potential losses that I've already concluded do not really matter. Nor am I doing the state's business here – I mean in spying on her. Winona is one of the cards in my game, that is all. And I have to protect her.

So here I am, innocently enough, Middleton, the coffee shop, same time, same day as last time, when I first met her. But Winona is not working, and I am reluctant to show my hand by enquiring of others. So next, I try the garden centre, again, the same day, same time as last time, the time I saw her scraping moss from the block-pavings. I loiter a good hour, even purchase a spade as cover, but she's not there either. I repeat the pattern over a few weeks, but to no end, so finally try the Pear Tree public house.

I am not an habitual frequenter of the public houses, which presents something of a problem in terms of deciding upon the appropriate dress-code. Also, the Pear Tree once had the reputation of a wild-west saloon, and I am unsure of the latter day practices for signalling aggression or passivity. It also means I shall have to drink beer, which I abhor.

But I discover the Pear Tree was forced to "up" its game during the pandemic, with ample outdoor seating under awnings. It also employed a table service the clientele proved reluctant to give up on, in exchange for a return to that unseemly, though all too British crush at the bar. So, it's rather more continental and civilised now. Hence, I can sit in sunshine, flick my phone for cover, and the young man comes to me.

His name badge says Simon.

I order beer. What sort of beer? I am reeled off a list. None of it means anything. I choose the last one, as it's the only one I can remember, and even its name has escaped me by the time it is delivered.

"Is Winona working this evening?"

"Depends who's asking?" says Simon.

"I'm George, a friend. Will you be seeing her?"

"Dunno... maybe." His expression suggests he thinks it unlikely anyone of my age could be friendly with the likes of Winona. However, I respect both his scepticism, and his evasiveness. Indeed, I judge him trustworthy enough for my purposes by virtue of the fact he also seems protective of her. So I give him the old phone, and I tell him to give it her. Clearly it amuses him, this phone, looking like something from the early noughties, because, well, that's its vintage. But it still works, which is its purpose, and, unlike its modern cousins, it will run for weeks off one charge.

"What's this then?"

"It's a burner. You know what a burner is?" He perks up at that. Yes, he's seen the movies, thinks he knows what a burner is. I have his attention. "Give her the phone. If you don't see her any time soon, like over the next couple of days, bin it. Right?"

He nods.

"Seriously, don't hang onto it."

"I won't," he says. "George, you said?"

"I did. Thank you." I slip him a ten. "Have one, yourself."

"Em, thanks..."

He drops the phone into his pocket. "She's in trouble?"

"I have information that might be of interest to her. That's all."

I know. This is a little out of character for me. But then I'm not entirely sure what my character is nowadays, nor indeed what it ever was, other than perhaps a little too submissive, at least when it came to negotiating my salary increases. Still, we are what we are, whatever *that* is. This particular fool – i.e. me – has a habit of transforming himself into The Hermit, you see? And the Hermit does not trouble himself over such worldly things. After all, are there any stories of the Arthurian Merlin, or Tolkien's Gandalf – both quintessential hermits – querying their salary?

Anyway, I'm not sure what's happened to Winona and, again, I don't want to flag too much my interest by enquiring any further. I have done my best, so I drink up, and move on.

Moving on involves driving round in circles for a time. I swing by my father's house, pause a moment there, as if I have something else to do with the place, before realising I do not, or that it can wait until next time. The truck is on the driveway next door, indicating the presence of the camo-man. This further indicates the contamination of the local noosphere with his particular brand of noise, and menace, and against which I still feel, for now, powerless.

Indeed his noise, his energy, his dogs, all of it coming out of the gates of Hell, so to speak, are more powerful than I know what to do with. I am tempted to say: "do nothing," for such a thing cannot help but destroy itself in the end. The only question is what else it will destroy in the process? My past certainly. No matter how I honour it by keeping home and garden tidy, I fear the camo man will get it, that he will replace my father's pretty bay window with an up and over garage door, and park his filthy truck in the space where I grew up with Lego bricks, Action Man, and Joe 90.

Perhaps the solution is to sacrifice it, before it is destroyed.

Interesting thought, George.

Just blow it up. Or burn it down.

No, you could buy another boat with the money.

Another boat? What the Hell for?

Because at times of flood, a man cannot have too many boats.

Quietude is not a reliable weapon under these circumstances. It is merely a groping for the words inside my head, with the demons hanging onto my coat-tails. And, try as I might, I cannot shake them off. They are like drag-anchors holding me to the profane world, when what I seek is the divine. So, I move on, drive out across the plain, drive by the empty, boarded public houses, and the gated weekend mansions of the rich, and the crooks. And finally, I circle back to the farm.

The farm feels more like the centre of things, like a pause in history that has opened up a gap into which I can squeeze an account of myself. My story is the story of my world, but it's also *your* world, so you should take note. It is also the table upon which I lay out the cards, and intuit their meanings, both metaphorically, and literally, as I am doing now: three cards, and a query. I have literally laid them out from my personal Tarot deck. One card tells the origins of the query, one tells of its manifestation, the last tells of its likely direction. The query, obviously enough is: *where the hell*

am I going with this?

The cards are each of them of the Major Arcana. This is the world of the gods, as I see it. It is the melee of collective influences upon the minds of all men. This evening, the cards answer with Death, the Hanged Man, and the Lovers.

Shit!

It's a warm evening, so I have moved outside, to the little patio Jasmine keeps for her tenants, who would otherwise lack a corner of the outdoors nurtured for their wellbeing. There are terracotta pots and half barrels she has planted, and are now in mid-summer bloom. There are lavender, roses, and long, frothy spills of blue and white lobelia. The air is still, I hear curlews, and muffled voices deep inside the house, and then a footfall on the deck:

"Mr Swift?"

Gentle voice, enquiring. Ah...

"Ms Dodds."

And about time, you say.

Chapter Seventeen

Death, The Hanged Man and the Lovers.

In which we talk with Elaine Dodds. She ventures an interpretation of the cards, and volunteers an unexpected confession. We confirm the unlikelihood of ever making love with her, while confirming, at least in principle, the utility of loving her from afar, that such a thing alone might provide sufficient energy to suit our needs. We discuss The Secret, though not with Elaine. So...

I stand, like an old fashioned gentleman to welcome my muse. She salutes my respects with a tilt of the head. In earlier times, I would have bowed, and she would have genuflected, in courtly fashion. That's how I imagine us, Elaine and I, characters from the eighteenth century, making way as best we can in this, the twenty first.

"I was wondering when I'd bump into you," she says.

"Likewise."

"I wasn't sure if you were the same Mr Swift."

"Nor you the same Ms Dodds."

"When you said you were looking for somewhere else to live, I wondered about mentioning the rooms here, but I wasn't sure they would suit you."

"I also had my doubts at first, but find they suit me very well."

She wears snug denim and a creamy blouse, a pale blue sweater around her shoulders, her hair is long and loose. She has the same demeanour I noted in her office – that is she is upright and precise, and, again, whether flirty or snooty, I cannot decide. She smiles, but the smile has something defensive in it, rather than inviting of intimacy.

She sees the cards: "You're reading your fortune?"

Normally such a statement would be accompanied by a smirk, but she seems genuinely interested. This is unusual. Most people are repelled by the cards, or they dismiss them as the instruments of lunatics or charlatans. As I have already explained, the truth of the cards is more complicated.

"Not my fortune, exactly. The cards are telling a story. Random, possibly. Who can say? I'm meditating upon it, trying to put it into words, seeing if they reflect my own story, at this point in time. Where there are overlaps, the resulting illumination can be

revealing."

"Ah... but that's fascinating. I mean... I'm sorry, I'm intruding."

"Not at all. Please, join me."

She sits. "May I?" she asks.

May you what? I've no idea, but gesture to the spread as if to say: "be my guest"

She points to the hanged man: "Crime and punishment?" she asks.

"Ah, no. Note how the man is caught by the foot, rather than the neck, so he is hanging upside down. Unusual, don't you think? Notice also how he does not look too concerned about his predicament. Indeed he has a halo around his head, suggesting either a divine blessing, or a revelation. I read it as suggesting a man who was previously too bound up in affairs, and has learned to let them go, to let them be, let them work themselves out, at least if he is to attain this state of serene magnanimity."

She nods as if she does not believe I am talking nonsense. "And death?" she says. "Not literally, I hope."

"Well, it's to be hoped not. Though if it is, I've nothing more to worry about. Death is unavoidable. It suggests the death of something, certainly, an old way of doing a thing, or an old way of living. And all deaths usher in a new era, do they not? One must simply be accepting of it, and embrace the new. Move with the times."

She raises an eyebrow at the lovers: "And these two?" She does not venture an interpretation of her own.

"Seeking union," I suggest. "The meaning in this image, like all the others, depends upon the context. It could be romantic, passionate, of course, though in my case that's unlikely, which tells me it's more to do with another kind of passion, an idea, a course of action. Whatever it is, it seems there is a mandate for it – I mean, that the angelic figure in the background is blessing the union suggests it is not a delusion, more a worthy pursuit, perhaps even fated. A potentially fruitful passion, a mission that will yield self-growth."

"So... let me see. You're pursuing an idea, a revelation of some sort. But the landscape of your enquiry has changed, and you must embrace that. You must recognise the hindering aspects of the affairs you are bound up in, and not struggle against them. Let them go their own way, or you will not be free. Is that an accurate

assessment, would you say?"

"Indeed, yes. But we can probably bend any of the cards towards personal significance in this way. This story might just as well apply to you, or to any of us."

"So how do we know if it's significant, and not simply a thing we have made up?"

"We can tell by our resistance to it, perhaps. That's always a sure sign. Or there is the feeling of a shift in one's understanding, an 'aha!' moment."

"Then, judging by my indifference to it, I would say the story does not apply to me."

"I'm sure it does not. But to me? Yes... it's a plausible expression of my current state of affairs. Sometimes we are too closely bound by the minutia of our lives to see the bigger picture – to think outside of the box, to see beyond the familiar patterns. The cards tell stories that sometimes help in that respect. They open doors, let the sunshine in."

She nods, but does not know what to say to this. I have perhaps embarrassed her, so I continue at a tangent in the quest for fresh ground.

"Ms Dodds, I'm very pleased to finally speak with you. It was beginning to feel awkward that I had not introduced myself, when I was perfectly aware of your presence here. Only the opportunity never arose. Please... forgive me."

"Since you neither gave nor meant any offence, Mr Swift, forgiveness is unnecessary."

"Well, perhaps I mean it in the broader sense, to decency and good manners."

I know... I'm really pushing it now. I'm supposed to be falling in love with this woman, and for our opening conversation I'm showing her what an other-worldly fellow I am. Indeed, I am inviting her to be disdainful, to put between us a league of clear water. Is this not how I have always managed things with women? I bare my strangeness to them, and I dare them to like me, warts and all. Mostly they do not, unless its my material secrets they have designs upon.

"Think no more of it, Mr. Swift."

"Thank you. The youngsters here tell me you visit your mother at the weekends. I trust all is well?"

"On the contrary, my mother consumes me, and I wish she was

dead."

An extraordinary statement but before I can properly digest it, she rises. I rise. "It's been very pleasant speaking with you," she says, as if the comment about her mother had never happened. "I shall turn in, I think."

Do I merely let it go? No, I must acknowledge it in some way. "I'm sorry, Ms Dodds, I hope I didn't..."

Tight little smile. "Not at all, you were being polite, Mr Swift... you're very kind, and I don't know why I said that. No sense in burdening another with it. Please forget I said it."

"On the contrary, if it would help? I..."

"I don't think it would... but thank you again. Goodnight to you."

A comedy of manners perhaps? But there, you see? I have some of her story, her myth. It is Hansel and Gretel, it is the ravenous mother, the mother who consumes her offspring, one piece at a time, renders them either useless in the world or, if they dare to defy her, as I suspect Ms Elaine Dodds has done, by putting some distance between them, the mother will dissolve them remotely in the acid of guilt, the guilt of what they perceive to be their own treachery towards her.

It is not the human being I was expecting to meet so soon. I am usually a long time projecting the goddess, before I ever meet the mortal woman, if only because we strive so hard to hide our true selves from one another. It complicates things of course. Also, you may have noticed, I seem to be setting so many hares running in this story I shall be a long time accounting for them all. And the important one I'll most likely miss and leave running, to the annoyance of you all.

But now I am thinking of another interpretation for the card of the lovers. My situation is indeed well described by death, and the hanged man, but the lovers? Might it not be that my situation can be more adequately transcended by romantic love and, though I know it usually peters out into the weeds, for want of reciprocation, when love is in its first flush it possesses an energy capable of powering one to another level of cognition. Elaine Dodds is a beautiful woman, she is spirited, and a part of her is angry. Loving her should be easy, but still, I hold myself emotionally apart from her.

She flicks a glance in my direction, perhaps wondering how much she has revealed of herself in our brief exchange. Quite a bit

as it turns out. I am also satisfied of the truth of the fact we have no future together, but this is not to say I shall not fall in love with her anyway. Indeed such a thing as that alone, unrequited, though unconventional in terms of the normal relations between men and women, might still power our needs, which are in themselves of course unconventional. It will open doors to the psyche, uncover the secret afresh, and this time, I hope, enable me to believe in it.

Shall we then?

Chapter Eighteen

Believing in it

In which we discuss the nature of belief, truth, the nature of meaning and knowing, at least in so far as such things go nowadays. We continue our attempts to contact Winona, then we might protect her, from what we do not know, nor how to explain, if and when we do catch up with her. We ramble as incoherently as a cognitive scientist, while the summer warms to an uncomfortable stickiness. We decide to return to the boat, bring it a little further north. In the absence of anything more concrete, it affords us the illusion of purpose. So...

The word "belief" in modern times has become a shadow of its former self. We use it nowadays to express our allegiance to a set of ideas, no matter how absurd, the truth of which we might have no proof, and upon subjects we might have no particular expertise other than an hour or so poking around the Internet, most of which is comprised of bullshit. Proofs are not available, or they may be beyond our intellect, or themselves subject to misinformation and corruption. Welcome, therefore, to the world, and its crisis of meaning.

Yet a belief can still be a useful thing if, in trusting our selves to it, it brings us forward to meet the future in a positive way, and therein, through knowing a thing we find meaning through personal growth. On the other hand belief can simplify a complex issue to the point of uselessness and self deception. And the information landscape is shattered, the sources we once trusted in this now post-modern age, moulder under a fashionable suspicion. Belief degenerates to a mere banner of allegiance, as society fragments. Meaning dissolves into a sea of chaos, into a million conflicting memes, all available at the touch of a hyperlink. And the most virulent of memes are always the most toxic.

Anyway, we leave a message...

"Winona. This is George... George from the fallen tree, and the coffee shop, and the garden centre. Would you mind calling me on this number? I would very much like to speak to you. Thank you."

The burner phone has been in circulation now for a few days, long enough for it either to have found its way to Winona, and if not, then to the bottom of the canal, at least if, on both counts, the young man, Simon, is worth his salt. So, I call the number, but she

does not pick up. I leave the message. It is the only message I shall leave. She must come willingly. I cannot protect her if she is running away, for I am too old to give chase.

It's hot this morning. Unfeasibly hot, even for what we once took for summer. The moors have been drying out for a month, and are at risk of fire. The brooks have shrivelled, and water must be delivered by quad-bike to where the flocks are feeding. They race from the hillsides to the machine, to slake their thirst. Jasmine laments the strangeness of the seasons: longer, drier springs, apocalyptic floods in winter. I do not tell her this the least of what is yet to come, if the intelligence is even half way correct. There is no sense in dwelling on it though, for both she and I will be gone by then. For all of that, I recall this is one of the regions predicted to be the most habitable, albeit tenuously. Others will become wastelands.

As the seas warm, the fish stocks around British waters are migrating north, beyond legal range of our trawler fleet. The South will desertify. London will succumb to increasingly high tides. I was reading classified reports on this twenty years ago, writing impact reports – one of my later tasks, I recall. Much that was predicted then has come to pass and so, I suspect, therefore, will the rest.

It doesn't matter. The pathological memetic noises make it impossible to communicate at a level sufficient to implement meaningful countermeasures anyway. We are nine billion on a planet capable of supporting a third of that number, even were we wise, ecologically sensitive, and knew our arse from our elbow, which we clearly do not. In short, there is nothing to be done, which, whilst it does not invalidate The Secret, it makes me wonder what The Secret is for, if we are unable to make use of it, beyond merely bearing it in mind. A tree falls alone in the forest and makes no sound. A planet blinks out, and though it gave rise to a self aware culture of staggering complexity, it makes no noise in the universe either. For all intents and purposes, we never existed in the first place.

I read that, seventy thousand years ago, an extinction event reduced us to a population of around 10,000 beings, and what we are now, grew from that. Climate change, a super-volcano, the reasons are debated, but all the evidence suggests we are as capable of pre-empting and subverting such a fate now, as we were then. So much for the complexity of our culture, if it could not evolve

sufficiently in that one key metric to have saved itself.

Or am I being unduly pessimistic? Perhaps we will merely return again to those 10,000 individuals, or 5000, or 1000. And the secret is for whatever they might make of it, that it is for them I am writing. No use posting it online then, no sense in writing a book. I shall store it on a device, perhaps a phone, bury it in a time-capsule, along with a solar charging device, and hope its resuscitation, a thousand years from now, will not be too taxing on the intelligence of the survivors.

But bury it where? Up here, on the moors, perhaps? That standing stone has lasted several thousand years. It might last several thousand more. I shall bury my time capsule there! The idea suddenly captivates me, seems at once inappropriately salient. Why inappropriately? Well... none among the survivor cohort will know how to read, how to decipher the symbols so familiar to us now. All will be lost. They will be like Winona's runic. The secret will die with me, and men will once again be reduced to running around with pointed sticks in search of prey.

Sorry... these are thoughts on the edge of liminality, on the edge perhaps even of sanity, as my days fade in and out in this stupor of heat. I walk the moors a little, in the later parts of the day when it is cooler, but the horse-flies linger, and are in such abundance this year. They render the experience an unpleasant one, raising lumps from my skin to which I must apply neat alcohol to draw the poison. It troubles me, this revelation, that The Secret is of no use any more. Which means it is irrelevant, whether I tell it to you, or not. And the telling it, or not, is the only thing holding you to my story, so perhaps we should call it a day.

My apologies for wasting your time.

And yet...

The weather is inverted. Usually it is a good few degrees warmer in the south than in the north. But my Met Office app is telling me the opposite is true, that the south-midlands is blessed with more temperate conditions for the next week or so, while the north will continue to bake. The south-midlands is also a rough description of where I left the boat, the Lady Lucy. It has been on my mind I should visit the mooring, make sure the boat has not sunk, since it was a considerable investment, and I would not like the inconvenience of having to arrange salvage, and insurance.

I am not an experienced bargee, indeed I bought the boat on a

whim, for lack of somewhere else to put the money – banks providing such unattractive investments just now. Navigation of the few locks I'd encountered thus far on my journey had proved technically challenging to my addled senses, and therefore frightening. But the day to day cruising was also relaxing, the evening mooring, often far away from roads and habitation, the preparation of food on the most basic of appliances, the battening down for the night, the comfort of my little bunk, had all taken on a soothing rhythm.

I am set then. My bag is packed for a week on the boat, if I can find it. My rent on the room is paid up in advance. All is secure for my return. Since my talk with Ms Dodds, I have looked out for her, like any dutiful puppy, and like any dutifully disdainful mistress, she has proved elusive. I don't know what I intend saying to her – probably nothing more than good morning, or good evening as the case may be. But as the case is... well... it is nothing but the shadow of a heartache that is both beautifully familiar, yet utterly pointless.

And remember, all of this is... all of it, I tell you... no more than psychical smoke. What I want is something concrete. I want an action to perform, which in turn might allow space to inform the psyche, which is without form and, in me at least for now, without direction. I tell myself I would like to move the boat further north, so it is closer to hand, and thus more easily kept ship-shape. I don't know if this is self deceit or not, but it sounds like a plan, and plan is what I want.

The car makes the logistics inconvenient though, I mean having to return to it after a day's cruising, perhaps by taxi, then drive as near as possible to where I left the boat again. It is a two person job – one to cruise the boat a day's journey north, say twenty miles, the other to rendezvous in the car, and overnight on the boat. But I am clearly lacking a suitable partnership here.

Then, the phone!

Which phone?

No, not that one. It's the burner, George, the burner is ringing!

"George?"

"Ah... Winona!"

"Well, this a bit weird. I don't know what you want. But I'm in a fix, and the cards are telling me you can help."

"Cards?"

"Never mind. Figure of speech."

"So... what's up?"

"Lost my jobs."

"All of them?"

"And I'm being evicted this morning."

Such an avalanche of calamity sounds unlikely. Am I correct in feeling the black balling of Winona has already begun? Or do I detect patterns where there are none?

"That's not good... obviously. Where are you?"

She is at the junction of Peel Street, with Langholm Avenue, Middleton, by the former Mount Pleasant council estate, where she has been renting. All the houses on the estate were bought up in the eighties, during Maggie's right-to-buy frenzy. The properties then found their way into the hands of private landlords as, I believe, was the longer term plan. The landlords let them, and the less scrupulous, but more enterprising tenants, sublet them, and some of them sub-sub let them, all the way back to the days of Victorian squalor, when the poor were squashed in like sardines.

I'm not sure what the regulations are pertaining to such matters, but whatever they are, they are ignored. And there is no money for local authorities to police it. While primary tenancies do have some legal protections, sub-sub tenancies do not. Thus, Winona is on the street with a couple of bin bags and a wheely-suitcase, after just one default on her rent. She might have postponed eviction by shagging the landlord who, she later tells me, floated the idea, but the idea was repulsive to her. I'm not sure if she is joking.

What she wants from me, she says is advice. I don't think this is true. I think she says it to spare her embarrassment. There is no need for embarrassment, but I cannot tell her so. First, and most important, she has not eaten for a while. How long she does not say, but demolishes an all-day breakfast like she could eat two of them. I keep her company, with breakfast, but let her have my sausage and bacon.

"You're a vegetarian, George?"

"Yes, I think I am."

"You think? But surely, you either are or you aren't."

"Possibly. But I have no clear ideas on things, these days. I am not a man driven by ideologies, you see? But judging by my actions of late, I would say yes. I am tending towards at least *becoming* a vegetarian."

So, an hour ago I was set for the M6, and a long journey south

to find the boat. Now I am sitting in Freshways supermarket cafeteria, plotting the seduction of a girl half my age. But be careful what you make of that word "seduction". We are lost in a crisis of meaning, remember? Which means nothing here is what it seems. And as regards said boat, and as previously mentioned, I am in need of partnership.

"Okay," she says. "So, I can stay at Simon's place. He's got this really nice flat, spare room and everything, and I do like Simon. He's already offered. I just have to say the word."

"Is this the Simon who works at the Pear Tree? The one who passed you the phone?"

She nods.

"Well, he seems a decent chap. And reliable. But you don't sound sure."

"I'm not sure about... well... you know... sleeping with him."

"Ah. Is this a condition Simon imposes, like your landlord or... merely... an optional extra, should you be open to it?"

"What a quaint way of putting it. Oh, it's definitely an option. Simon's a nice guy. But he's also hot... and I just feel it's bound to happen."

"Well... I'm hardly qualified to offer relationship advice. But you're both young, unattached... I presume?..."

She nods. Both are indeed unattached.

"And you find him attractive, you say?"

She nods, as if to say she knows herself all too well in this respect.

"Then I'm not sure I understand your dilemma, Winona."

"It's about commitment, George. I'm not sure I want to commit to one of those relationships. And I'm not one of those girls who can sleep with a man without committing."

"Well, that's very admirable. Could you not then... just avoid it?"

"Oh, come on. Didn't they have sex in the seventies?"

"I'm sure they did. I was only a kid in the seventies, but I'm certain it went on. My own sphere of activities, so to speak, would have been the eighties, and the nineties. I don't remember the noughties much, so I imagine things were in decline by then. And after that... well, events somewhat overtook me. But thinking back, you know... we were quite advanced, for an older generation, actually."

"You're trying to say the younger generation always thinks its

the one who invented it."

"I would, but the data suggest there's more celibacy among the young, these days, than there ever was in the past, that in fact, while it was most certainly the older generations who invented it, it's yours who is abandoning it."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Socio-economic factors mostly. Plus your own reservations vis-a-vis the hot Simon, does rather support my point. And no wonder. It's a difficult time to be younger than say thirty five. And economically... well, impossible to aspire to anything like a normal life at all."

"You have such a strange way of talking, George, you know?"

"I do? Sorry."

"No, I like it. It's weird, but in a pleasant way. And thank you for breakfast, and for listening... but I still don't know what to do."

"Well... if it's just a little time you need, while you think things through, I mean regarding Simon, I have a place I'm not using. You can stay there, if you like."

"Really?"

"Unless of course, you have parents you can call upon? Not always ideal I know but..."

"No parents. I'm a foundling, George."

"Really?"

"Literally. Found in a shoe box, in a telephone booth. Life of institutional care."

"Oh... well, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. Not your fault. And I did all right. Not turned to a life of crime or anything."

"Well then, as I see it, there are two options. I have a house which, as I said, I'm not using. You'd be welcome to stay there, though it's hardly ideal and I'd not be entirely comfortable leaving you there alone. Noisy neighbour, you see? Death metal music at all hours and a pair of hounds you could saddle up and ride, if they didn't eat you first."

"Well, it's kind of you, but I'm scared of dogs, even little ones. So... the second option?"

We banter nicely, have you noticed? Why she trusts me I don't know. Because the cards tell her to, I suppose. And in the great scheme of things they're as good a judge as any.

And the other option, of course, is...

Chapter Nineteen

The Lady Lucy

In which we describe our boat, and establish the rules, and living arrangements for having Winona on board. We recruit her into being its captain, though we must first train her in the way of boats. And we make an unexpected discovery, about Winona. So...

I had in mind a change of name for the boat, something not so twee, not so quintessentially English. Personally, I would have gone for something more pretentiously mythic. Charon, perhaps – not to be confused with Sharon. Except Charon was the ferryman of the underworld, not the boat. I don't know if the Greeks ever named the boat which carried the dead. The canal system isn't quite the underworld, but it does possess a sub-cultural vibe, its network threading through every nook and cranny of England, both urban and rural. It is, I have often thought, a hiding in plain sight, though that does also describe the underworld rather well, both the criminal and the metaphysical varieties.

And these long-boats, this queer class of thin-beamed iron cruiser, anachronistic, yet beloved, and gaily painted, they are certainly not a cheap way of living and, for the truly nomadic, they possess little by way of actual escape. As far south as London, as far north as Ripon, and that's your lot. As for a means of A to B, it is only a little faster than walking. Conceived of centuries ago as a means of transporting fragile goods, they now support those seeking an alternative, and more leisurely pace of life. I do not mean to disparage it, nor its potential – rather I wish to expose my ignorance of it. Like I said, I bought the boat as an investment, nothing more, and had barely begun to know the waterways, when I was pulled off them by circumstances.

Anyway, I have stuck with the name: Lady Lucy. There is nothing wrong with banality. It is often the best defence in times otherwise dominated by over-elaboration, by bullshit and other wordy misdirections. She is ship shape, not an old boat by any means, indeed there is still the scent of newness about her interior timbers. She is also technologically advanced, being propelled by solar-charging electric. This does rather limit her cruising range, but adds immeasurably to her off-grid charm. The hull is sound, but due a blacking – this being a terribly fussy business, which requires the

boat taking from the water and raising on trestles, then her undersides scraped and re-painted, the zinc anodes replaced if need be. A boat that has skimped on blacking is not an investment. It is a liability. It is, indeed, liable to sink.

I had picked out a boatyard on the Leeds-Liverpool canal, close by Middleton, to do the work, thinking that, by the time I had navigated my way there, I would be an experienced boat dweller. There are any number of other yards equally capable, and my choice had more the sense of an arbitrary objective about it. But then, like much in life, even arbitrary objectives can ignite a well-head of meaning. And so it had been, for a time, until I got word of my father's decline.

So... now, I have hidden Winona in the forward cabin, where she sleeps. She is at least safe on the boat, for I cannot rid myself of the notion the ghoulish bedfellows of the state had already begun their programme of intimidation. Or was it that by rendering her destitute, they sought to take away her freedom to focus on others things, like mounting a resistance against the likes of Rick Etty Homes. Which in turn means Clive did not trust me after all, or they did not trust Clive. And if they did not trust Clive, then the integrity of the service has already been sidelined in favour of other methods, as practised by friends of friends of no discernible moral standing.

It always happens this way. When one is observing the political disintegration of any nation, similar patterns emerge, though I had not imagined I would be observing poor Albion in the same way. Those of poor character, and avaricious natures find their way into positions of power, and the honourable depart the field. There is of course a momentum to the institutions which keep a nation going for a while, but eventually they grind down. The time this takes is roughly in inverse proportion to the levels of corruption within the corridors of power. I sound cynical but really these are purely analytical observations, and for which, I assure you, sound metrics do exist.

At first we do not notice authoritarian trends. Then we do, but we ignore them, imagining there is a self righting mechanism that will not permit such outrage, that there are sufficient good fellows still around to make a stand. Then the journalists who do not lie, or refuse to temper their lines, are sent to prison. Were I analysing Albion as a foreign nation, and from the available intelligence, I

would have much to report, and none of it good, but then I am getting on in years, and, since I have lost my mind, I am seeing patterns everywhere. You must therefore pay no heed, and go on with your life as usual.

Anyway, it was after dark when, after much muddling, we found the boat, moored about a mile from the road where the car is now parked. Winona left most of her possessions in it, but clung doggedly to her suitcase, which she wheeled the length of the rutted towpath. I had begun to despair when my torch beam finally lighted upon the bow and the curlicue script of the Lady Lucy. Thus, we are spared to fight another day. Or... well... perhaps not fight, exactly.

Wrong metaphor. Forgive me.

We are not hiding exactly. Rather, we are seeking retreat upon the waters.

Winona had not registered much emotion either way on coming aboard, though I had hoped she would find the Lady Lucy a charming and welcoming abode, that she would make friends with it at once. I suppose, given what we had discussed on the journey, I could hardly blame her for a lack of enthusiasm.

I wake now in the upper bunk, mid-ships, wondering how best to return to the matter we talked about yesterday. Much of it I had glossed over with promises of further elucidation, in time – this being my admission to her I had been approached by dark forces, with a view to keeping her from meddling in the Middleton meadow development. What that said to her about me, I don't know, I mean that I was even known by such forces – also what effect it has had upon her trust, of me. But then does she have any choice in the matter?

She can have sex with Simon, or sex with me. Except I don't mean the latter literally, of course, only to say she is put in a position of vulnerability, and reliance upon a man whom she must suspect of requiring favours – at least of some sort – in return. We will have to talk about it some more today. I will have to invent a story, in order to make it all true for her.

She sleeps late in the forward cabin, so I access the towpath from the after-deck, through the galley. This works out well, I think. The cabin and the well-deck, she shall consider her own, and I shall not venture there, unless invited. The first task of the day is to clean the extensive solar arrays on the roof, though the batteries seems to

have been charging well in my absence and are tip-top full. The instruments tell me we have power for six hours' cruising, or around twenty four miles flat out.

There are swans and geese on the water, which, at this early hour, resembles a black mirror. There are voles on the opposite bank, cattle in the field beyond. The nearest town is miles away, but the map tells me there is a farm-shop and cafe close by. We will walk there for supplies, and breakfast, when she surfaces. For now there is only coffee, and tins of soup on board.

She appears on the after deck mid-morning, looking tousled and shy. "Were you serious, last night?"

"About?"

"Me driving this boat all the way to Middleton?"

"You'd be doing me a great service. I would pay you. And it would keep you out of sight for a while."

"I've never handled a boat."

"Neither had I until recently. You'll soon pick it up."

"What if I sink it?"

"Oh... that's very unlikely." Actually it isn't. It is a beginner's trick to upend a barge, going through the locks, but I do not tell her this. "Anyway, it's less stressful than staying in Middleton."

"You think so?"

"They've set you on your uppers, Winona. It strikes me it's more than just unfortunate you lost all three of your jobs and got evicted in one go. No one is so unlucky. It has more the air of a conspiracy about it."

"Well, thanks for your confidence. But who are *they*? Are they police? Gangsters? Private security wombles? Who?"

"Really, it's hard to say. Hard to tell the difference any more – such a muddle of incompetence and malfeasance, it's impossible to know which way is up."

"But all I did was cast a few spells. Nobody's afraid of witches any more. People just laugh at us."

"Oh, they're afraid, certainly. Of what I'm sure they don't know. Perhaps they credit us with more power than we possess. But when the oligarchy is afraid, no reprisal is considered too heinous. Best just to be mindful of everything, and work out how to take care of ourselves, which for now is lying low and staying away from Middleton."

She thinks on this for a while, then makes a show of dismissing

her fears with a shrug and a shake of the head. "Never could hold down a job for more than five minutes though."

"You never tried to find graduate work?"

"Tried, yes. I discovered most of the smaller places suffer from psychopathic bosses who create a toxic atmosphere. Try surviving that? Who'd even want to? Listen, give me any two numbers and I can add them, multiply them, divide them, give you the square and the cube roots, all in my head." She clicks her fingers for emphasis. "Like that, you know? Don't ask me how I do it. Numbers are like a shape to me, and the operation is a kind of motion, the two coming together, and the shape that's left is the answer. You'd think someone would have use for that, find a direction for it. But it's all just spreadsheets, and emails and performance targets, and getting shouted at for taking so much as half a day sick when you're on the blob. Caught Covid twice, you know, working for a shyster outfit, who wouldn't let anyone work from home. And boy was I sick, both times. Something's wrong George. It's all gone sour, and it's never coming back. Not working for anyone who doesn't respect me, ever again, even if I have to starve. So... you've gone quiet. Say something."

"Twenty four times fifty eight."

"Thirteen hundred and ninety two. Don't insult me, George. Bigger numbers, throw in some decimals. Don't be scared."

"Nine hundred and forty seven divided by eight hundred and eight?"

"More like it. One point seven two zero two nine seven,... oh, lovely, that's an infinitely recurring decimal; zero two nine seven, zero two nine seven. Would you like the square root of that?"

"Go on."

"One point zero eight two six... zero three two..."

I have met her kind before. They challenge the orthodoxy. They spit in the eye of the Hierophant. What she has just done is not normal. But it is not impossible. "Heavens, Winona."

"Kind of weird though, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. I imagine you had a lot of trouble at school over that."

She nods sagely. "Too right I did."

We are drinking black, instant coffee. I have a hankering for croissants from the farm shop, but Winona is more hungry for understanding, and so presses me not-too-delicately for information. She wears a tee-shirt and shorts. It is the first time I am aware she

has legs and breasts. I am reminded how I used to pay attention to such things, also that I lost interest along the way when they became more of a theoretical, rather than an empirical, concept. That I am stirred to notice now has me wondering if I am entirely done with the empirical. I do hope so, for women of my own age rarely have legs and breasts like hers.

Then a strange thing happens.

She pulls back her hair, tugs it in frustration. In doing so she reveals her ears. They are pointed, like a fantasy creature. She sees I've noticed and covers them at once. There follows an awkward pause. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise."

"It's called Stahl's ear," she says. "People either find them repulsive, or they have perverted fantasies about doing it with elves. Neither is good."

"Your assessment is probably correct."

"They used to reckon at the home, it's why I was given up as a baby. Not normal, see? What kind of person would do that?"

"Are you angry about it?"

"Not any more. But who would do it, George?"

"I don't know. What do the cards say?"

"The cards?"

"The ones that said I could help you. I presume you read the Tarot?"

"And you don't believe in that sort of thing, I suppose."

"On the contrary. I've been reading the Tarot for twenty years. Sometimes the cards help, sometimes they don't, but that's the way with oracles. You'd be surprised what I believe, and what I don't. So, what do they tell you?"

"No, what do you say?"

"That it was most likely someone very young, and frightened. That it was perhaps someone who's carried the guilt at what they did, their whole lives and wishes they had not given you up."

"That's what I think, too. And what the cards say – which is the same thing really. Thanks, George."

"There are no winners in a situation like that. But, as you said, you've turned out all right. As for your ears, I suspect there are some who would pay a fortune to have them surgically altered to look like that. They are perfect, by the way, and very pretty."

"Thanks. I don't mind my ears any more, but I was bullied at

school over them, which makes me cautious in public. And with strangers."

"Ah yes. Anything that marks us out as different will cause the pack to turn upon us."

"Then you must have had a hard time yourself, George."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"You're pretty weird. Quiet. Other-worldly."

"I suppose I am. I learned early on how to blend in with the background. No one ever knew I was there."

"Is that why you became a spy?"

"I was never a spy. Always a backroom boy. An analyst. Really, you mustn't make too much of what I told you last night. When I say I was a civil servant, it's true. I was just a civil servant, only in a particular kind of service."

"Did you ever know any spies?"

"Well, one never really knows a spy. Not even the spies know themselves. They are, in my experience, deeply conflicted people. Controllers of spies are different, quite cold, I found. Amoral in their manipulation of the weaknesses of others. It helps, of course, if you've had your emotions beaten out of you first at public school. Being a psychopath also helps."

I am diverting her with nonsense. Of course I was bullied, albeit briefly. It came to an end when I broke the bastard's nose with a cricket bat. And, though I'd had an exemplary record for good behaviour up to then, I was almost expelled for it. Lesson: if you must exact revenge, it should be cold, underhand, and deniable. But otherwise best forgotten.

No sense dredging all that up though, eh, George?

"Winona, I have no plan. No agenda. Your handling the boat for me is an idea, that's all. And it would be helpful to have the boat moving gradually up north, while I take care of the business of my father's house. Other than that, I don't know. Or just hang out here, keep an eye on the boat for me. Have a think about it. I can drive you back to Middleton any time you want. Today. Tomorrow. Anytime. Just say the word."

"I'd be afraid to go back, now, George. I'd no idea what we were up against." She looks sad, swallows something down, turns her gaze upon the water. "I used to love it round there, you know? The woods, the meadows. It was hard, living with even the level of development there is now. So much has been lost already. But this

latest thing... it's just so..."

"Brutal? Final?"

"Overwhelming. Is there nothing we can do?"

"Nothing. The tree falling. That was a sign. It's already over. What do the cards tell you?"

"They tell me it's not the important thing. But that confuses me. How can it not be important? It's everything, George. I lie awake at night thinking about it. It means *everything*. Does it not to you?"

"That place is my childhood. It represents everything that is good and innocent, and beautiful. When I think of summer, I think of the dappled sunlight in Durleston Wood. I see that meadow and the outline of the trees on the hill. But then... this valley we're in now, it was beloved to someone, a long time ago. Imagine it. Two hundred, three hundred years ago. It would be commons land then. No one had heard of trespass. Then came the enclosures, and suddenly your secret little dell, your favourite tree, that blissful little run of a stream, that summer swimming hole, all of it was out of bounds. And then someone far away had the idea of cutting a canal through the middle of it. Then you'd get boats like this chugging up and down hauling coal and pottery. All of what you had once known, stolen, ruined..."

"All right. I get that but..."

"Ask the cards again. Ask them about that feeling. Explore the idea it might be an opening to something else, that maybe, yes, the thing itself is not important, the loss of green. Our green. We're losing green every day, somewhere in the world. So perhaps it's more our reaction to it. Explore your reaction, Winona. Follow where it leads. There may be a doorway to somewhere else at the end of the tunnel of your despair. And mine."

Chapter Twenty

Learning the ropes

In which we instruct Winona in the ways of the boat, we speculate on the nature of the afterlife, on the dream-like nature of the universe, and answer questions on the possible meaning of life. Oh, yes. Seriously! Winona draws the Tarot, discerns my future and learns the nature of my disability. She tackles head on the unlikelihood of us becoming lovers. So...

There is something idyllic about the mooring. We are out of sight of the world. There is just this ribbon of water leading off, who knows where? the past and present being of equal measure now, and consisting of nothing in particular. There are meadows to left and right, rising to a forested skyline, painting out the undoubted squalor of the towns beyond. I wonder how long before these meadows, like my own, are built upon by the foetid sprawl, and the appropriation of all Albion's green by property tycoonery? How soon before the rooftops are visible, coming over the skyline like an invading army?

On the towpath, we have seen not a soul in days, but other boats have passed, cruising slow, raised hands in greeting. They do not see impending doom. Neither do I, at least not all the time. It depends how wide I allow my consciousness to expand. That's the thing with the boat of course. If someone spoils the view, you can slip your mooring and find somewhere else. Next bend, next village, next county. But eventually one will simply run out of water, or the lock gates will fall in for want of the money to repair them, and then our world will be narrowed to a cut of mud and slime, our dream-boat grounded in the same shit as everyone else.

Anyway...

A narrow boat is a peculiar beast to manage. There is no steerage without forward propulsion, unless you have the fangled bow-thrusters, which the Lady Lucy does not. She is slow on the turn, slow to stop. She requires both a gentle touch and a firm hand, at the same time. She is better managed with a crew of two, one man to the throttle and tiller, the other the ropes. Single handed it is more difficult, requires aforethought, and this is what I am asking of Winona. How we got into this situation, I conveniently forget, and am cheered only by the fact she seems happy to give it a

go. She may feel differently in a few days.

Our instruction begins.

First lesson. We move the boat, closer to where the vehicle is parked. Winona steers, masters the throttle, the steerage, the stopping, the centre-line, and the mooring – first with bollards and eyes, and then the pin of last resort. She masters the knots with an ease that she puts down to her girl-scouting.

Two miles further north there is a single rising lock. The morning's cruise takes this in, moors us a little beyond it for lunch. Then a wide cutting, what they call a winding hole, allows us to turn the boat, which is longer than the canal is wide, and would otherwise block it if we tried. We come back, down the same lock, turn in another winding hole, and come up to our original mooring at dusk, ready for another run in the morning. We'll do this for as many days as Winona can bear without getting bored. She is lively company, and sweet. I discover I could live this way with her for ever, which is a peculiar idea, but worth exploring – in imagination I mean. Not in reality. In reality, long term, heavens knows what I am to do with her.

On our first run, Winona absorbs both the barge-craft and also how hesitant and clumsy her instructor is – in particular (she tells me later) the look of dread in his eyes as we approach the lock gates. For sure I have always viewed the entrance to the locks as the gateways to a watery grave. I'm not sure if I will ever become so blasé as other boaters seem, when negotiating their rise and fall. Also, Winona is such a slight girl, I wonder if I am expecting too much, that she can haul several tons of steel by the centre-line, keep the boat steady in the lock, let her down easily without risk of leaving her hanging, or tipping her on the cill.

Of course, she manages it all very well.

On the second day, Winona takes full command, and it is my turn to observe from the stern deck. She needs no reminders, follows the previous day's instructions to the letter, except in places where she improves upon the task in hand. She is slick, and up through the lock in half the time. She is also energetic on the ropes, and deft with their handling.

"You've done this before?"

"No way, George. I would have remembered. This is really fun."

Her enthusiasm is a balm.

As we approach our mooring at the end of the second day, she

looks happy on the tiller, and a world away from the indifference of that first night, when we arrived by torchlight to a cold and empty boat. Now, I think the boat has renewed her confidence and her energy. Myself, though, I feel odd. I had thought it would take a week to bring her to the point where she would have skill enough to take the Lady Lucy on her own, but she could clearly do it tomorrow.

What bits I have not taught her, she could no doubt work out on her own as things arise, and make a better job of them than I could. My presence or, more to the point, her company, is to be short lived, but, once again, I have found, in these short days with Winona, a normality and a lack of care I have not known since childhood.

After a drive to the supermarket, the boat is now properly provisioned for a longer journey, and we dine well – though I had noted with sadness many of the still empty shelves at the supermarket. Gone, it seems are the days of plenty. That feeling of strangeness and decline, persists post pandemic, post BREXIT, though both were years ago and is amplified this evening by a change in the weather, as dusk comes on. Then there is the ever present spectre of those European and Middle Eastern wars my former colleagues failed to call, then called too late.

An ethereal mist rises over the meadow, and spills across the burnished cut. I take a moment on the after deck, where I feel I am losing myself, like my soul is slipping out of the body and wanting to float. I tell it we cannot possibly do such a thing under the present circumstances. It would be irresponsible, to say nothing of embarrassing. In the end the mist takes my chest, so I slip back below into the saloon.

Winona looks up from her Tarot.

"Do you believe in life after death, George?" she asks.

The question floors me. I look for the smile which might suggest mirth, but she is serious. Are we are to discuss existential matters already? This is most unexpected.

"What do the cards tell you?"

"They confuse me. What do you say?"

"I'll need a cup of tea before I answer that one."

Tea is provided, and its preparation grants me time to think.

"Well?" she asks.

"I don't reject it out of hand. I suspect it would not be life

exactly, not as we have it now, but I imagine some sort of psychical continuation of awareness, outside the bounds of space and time, is possible. It wouldn't be wise, or indeed healthy, to bank on it of course. The Stoics were right, about that. But other philosophers – the modern idealists for example, argue their case well, as do the near death studies, so we'd be wise to reckon at least on the possibility..."

"Stoics?"

"Philosophers of the Hellenistic era. Marcus Aurelius, is the most well known, at least to me, and mainly on account of his extensive writings. You might look him up. Bugger the gods, he would say, forget the ever-after. Be easy with death and you'll live a good life."

"But if there is something to come afterwards. What's the point of life? I mean aren't we all just wasting our time, and better off quitting before the pain and the sheer frustration gets too much?"

"The point? Winona... I... "

"Please, George. What do you think? If there's something to follow, what's the point of labouring in the messiness of the world?"

"Oh... but there's every point. Indeed, it might well be the *whole* point. Where we end, psychologically speaking, in this life, is perhaps where we'll start in the next. Which means, I suppose, one must somehow to learn how to be as full a person as the circumstances one is born into allows."

"As full a person? How do you define a full person?"

"Well... insightful, compassionate, courageous with the truth."

"The point isn't happiness, then? I mean to attain happiness?"

"Oh, no. Happiness is always fleeting, whether we live in a palace or on a tin boat. We should enjoy it when it comes along of course, enjoy it to the full, laugh and be merry. But the point of life is more to awaken, to deepen. As real as all of this seems – because we have no other choice, but to accept it as real – it's really... well... a bit like a dream, I think."

"You think? We dream the universe and everything in it? That's what you're saying?"

"No, no... that's the solipsistic fallacy. It's the other way round. The universe dreams us."

"I never thought of it that way. And are you there, do you think?"

"Am I where?"

"Are you as full a person as you think you can be?"

"Lord no. I've ever such a long way to go before I'd be comfortable facing my maker. Not that I believe there is a maker as such – it's more of an abstract concept, I imagine."

"But... you really believe all of that?"

"Believe in it? Again, sadly no. There is a censor in me who forbids it. Though, paradoxically, I did glimpse it once, experience it, rather. At the time, it was a thing more real than anything I've experienced before. But there's something in us that denies it afterwards. I suppose it's only trying to keep us safe, by shutting out the full nature of things, and the feelings it inspires in us, otherwise we'd be consumed by it. Overwhelmed. Burned up..."

"Feeling? What was the feeling?"

"It was love. But not love as we think of it between a man and a woman. The love of a parent for a child is closer, but still more than that. I think it was what the ancients called agapé.

"When I was a boy, I fell in love with a girl in my class. I didn't want to possess her, to make love to her – heavens I'd no idea what making love was then. I simply wanted her to want to be with me and, through that connection, somehow, I think, I imagined I'd reconnect with the love of God. It's a very Romantic idea –I mean Romantic with a capital 'R'. But more than that I wanted always the very best for her. I think the love I felt – scaldingly potent, yet entirely innocent – that's as close to agapé we get, as human beings."

She draws three cards, fans them, folds them back before I can see. "When was this?"

"Like I said, I was a boy,"

"No, not that. I meant your vision, your experience..."

"Oh, that. Twenty years ago, I think. I wish I could say it was whilst meditating on the Wudang Mountain, or in a cave, or in an ashram, but it was in a flat I was renting, over a chip-shop in Harpenden. What did the cards say, just now?"

"The Hermit, reference to the philosophers, I suppose. And you. They're saying you were hurt in some way. Am I getting that right? What happened? Were you shot?"

"Nothing so dramatic. I told you, I was just a civil servant, overseas mostly. For want of a better name, these days, they call it Havana Syndrome. I was, well – as a best guess – collateral damage in an attack by death-ray. Beyond that, no one knows, really. I'm occasionally confused, but mostly lucid, if a little strange at times,

as you might have noticed. I'm not sure about the prognosis for the future – a gradual recovery, I hope, and a ripe old age, though the possibility of early dementia is not to be discounted. I'm attempting to rewire the old grey matter, while I have the chance. There are various methods one can deploy, and healthy living. I could be barking up the wrong tree of course..."

"Why do you trust me?"

My... we're chopping about here. Is she trying to get at the truth by unbalancing me, by disrupting my narrative?

"No reason, beyond instinct. Most people I instinctively mistrust, so those I instinctively trust tend to stand out. Why would I not trust you?"

"I don't know. I do know how much these boats cost though. I'm afraid I'll sink it. Catch it on one those cills, going through a lock. I'm this girl you just met, remember? and you're trusting me with your life savings."

"No, I've been watching you. You're afraid of nothing. And actually I got this boat quite cheap."

"No you didn't. I... I could make off with it. I've been looking at the map. I could take it to Llangollen. Or Ripon. You'd never see me again."

"A slow boat isn't the best way to make a getaway. Lovely town Ripon, by the way. The cathedral there is wonderful, as I recall. And you know, they blow a bugle in the market square, every night at nine o'clock, haven't missed for a thousand years. That would be a fine cruise, and something of a pilgrimage about it, wouldn't you say? It will take you through Middleton on your way. If you decide to do that, let me know. I'd gladly sell my father's house to my neighbour with the killer dogs, and come with you. He seems ever so anxious to park his truck in my living room. I half expect him to make me a sinister offer I cannot refuse. I shall give in of course, having first driven up his price to just the shy side of violence against my person. And purely for devilment. Anyway... rest easy. The boat is insured."

"But... what if I want to have sex parties on board? And things like that."

"Oh... you must consider the boat your home, and do what you want, sex parties and all, provided I could be excused of course, and spared the details, and you cleaned up afterwards of course. The Lady Lucy is after all, rather a demure young lady, or were you just

thinking of Simon? He'd be most welcome, naturally, should you wish to pursue matters in that direction... please don't hesitate to invite him... indeed I'd feel less anxious about leaving you alone here."

"No... no. I wasn't thinking that. Any of that. Truth be told I'm not sure I like Simon that much, otherwise I'd be afraid to let him see my ears. As it is, I don't care. I don't know what I was thinking, don't know what's happening here, that's all."

"You are learning to handle the Lady Lucy, and have accepted the challenge of delivering her up-country to Middleton. It's not a commitment. You can bail out any time. I'll come and get you, take you home, take you anywhere you want to go. I can bring the boat back myself some other time, though from what I've seen so far, she's in safer hands with you, than she is with me."

"I'm not bailing out. Who said anything about bailing out? And in case you've forgotten, I have no home. This boat is my home for now, so I'll be heading north very slowly, thank you very much, so as to delay the time before I get evicted."

"You won't be evicted. Take your time. Do what feels right, when the time comes. I don't need the boat. Though I may pop in now and then, should I need to lie low."

Yes. Yes, George, that sounds like a plan.

"All right... and finally. At the risk of ruining everything, I'm not sleeping with you. Just to put that one to... well... to bed."

"Ah... well..." How to respond without being ungentlemanly. "Were I a much younger man, Winona, the thought of sleeping with you would no doubt have me fainting with desire, but nowadays, the thought of those kinds of relations confuse me. I don't think I'm quite past them, yet I'm afraid I do find ladies of my own age, by and large, unattractive, whilst ladies of your age would be far too energetic for my delicate ways. Plus, though beauty has undoubtedly been passed down the line to your generation, alas I have made all of you my daughters – if you will forgive my old fashioned patriarchy, to say nothing of my antiquated language."

"Oooh! You're a hard one, George. A hard one to know. But at the bottom of you, you're sweet. And I love you."

Okay, that went well.

"And I love you too, Winona. So, are you all right to take the boat on your own tomorrow?"

She nods – relishes the adventure, I think.

"Then I shall be on my way in the morning, and leave you to it."

Chapter Twenty One

The Hermit, the five wands and the six cups

In which we come to a decision about selling my father's house, and whether or not to abandon Marsh Avenue, and Durleston Wood to their inevitable fate at the hands of the Hierophant. And then the moors catch fire. So...

The Hermit and the *what*? Give me a moment, I'll explain. But for now, what I have decided to do is to sell my father's house. Yes, that's what I *shall* do! That is what I *can* do. At least I think I can. I shall burn my past, sell the ashes to the devil, and hope he chokes on them. Though why I should suddenly feel such a release after only a few days with Winona, I do not know. Perhaps she is one of those whose presence heals.

High Priestess, remember, George?

But then again, after all, I mean...

Marsh Avenue will never be the same as it was, when I was a boy. The white vans, the cracked pavers, and the concrete, they are not going away, and no one is planting cherry trees, and flowers in their gardens any more. England is a lean, mean shadow of its former self, where people can no longer afford to heat their homes, let alone make them pretty.

There are no Mr Williams' with their neat, white jackets, and dickie-bows, trilby hats, and Voigtländer cameras. They have been condemned as pseudo-intellectuals, or worse, given half a chance, as paedophiles. There is no soul and those who seek soul are ridiculed, or pathologised. They have been banished from their class, smeared with the non-specific, but highly serviceable catch-all excrement of perversion. Now it's all jogging bottoms, dreary tattoos, tee shirts and baseball caps.

It's hard to imagine the meadow under two hundred houses, but since the tree came down, this too possesses a grim inevitability. We fear to let go of our memories, for in doing so it is as if a part of us has never been. It takes away a piece of our identity, our grounding. It is a kind of domicide. Be done with it then. I need never go back to see it. I could live anywhere, live on the boat even, slip my moorings and move on, whenever the beauty and the spirit of a place is lost. I could become truly nomadic, with Winona as my skipper, ferrying me across the Styx.

Now that's all well and good, while my physical health is intact. But what of the last days, when I need doctoring, when I need diamorphine to ease me out? I suppose I have as much chance of a GP's appointment anywhere, as nowhere, these days. Which means not at all. The local surgeries never did recover from the pandemic, nor the last blast of the nasty party, and the memory of them seems quaint now, relegated to the same curlicue-painted box as postmen in uniform and milkmen in caps and aprons. I shall have to rely upon the pill of last resort. And, no, I am not joking.

A tree falls alone in the forest. It makes no sound.

I spilled the secret.

What's that? You missed it? Weren't you paying attention?

It should render everything else I have to say here banal. Ah, but only if you could believe in it.

As for the present, I return to the farm to find it has almost been destroyed by fire. The moor is hung over with a pall of smoke the colour of straw. A monstrous yellow bulldozer is dozing by the farm gate, it having cut a firebreak around the entire yard – farmhouse, barn and all, in order to save them. It has piled the earth in a bank, like an ancient defensive fortress. All around is blackness and stench.

Jasmine greets me, broom in hand from sweeping the yard. The boys are out rounding up sheep from here, there and everywhere, she says. They were scattered by the fire, which had advanced on several fronts, converging to threaten the farm. Unlike in previous years where the fires were begun by fools, this was the result of freakish lightning strikes, without the usual accompaniment of torrential rain, and the moors are like tinder just now.

Strange weather, she says, and did I find my boat?

"Oh... it was still there, yes. Thank you."

Why don't I manoeuvre it to somewhere accessible, on foot from a railway station, she asks. Why don't I bring it slowly north that way, without the complication of the car – merely travel on the train, bring it in stages to the marina at Middleton. Jasmine is ever-practical, pragmatic, likes to plan, likes others to have the benefit of her wisdom. I might have found this annoying once. Nowadays, I don't care. This, I explain is my longer term aim. She has almost lost everything, but thinks first to enquire of others.

I don't know why I do not mention that I have installed a novice skipper to do this for me. Do I worry Jasmine will suspect my

motives, I mean in being involved with a girl half my age, when she would rather I made my bed with Ms Dodds? I don't know. I suppose the story I am writing for myself, and Winona, is too complicated for casual conversation, and transcends the ordinary.

Anyway, it rained heavily in the night, and parts of the dug ditch have flooded, now. So, as well as the defensive mound there is also, this morning, the appearance of a moat. The OS map shows the remains of many a moated farm in Lancashire. Now there is one more. The originals date to the medieval period, but were more symbols of the status of their owners, than actual defensive features. They were the minor rich, and the local celebs playing at "kings and castles". Nothing changes, then. Still, there is a sense of siege here, and it fits the gathering mood. The farm is threatened, and the world is encroaching. We have the normalisation of corruption, a general collapse in infrastructure, empty shelves in the supermarkets, power cuts, and the earth itself turning agin' us. I feel there is no going back from this. My advice, as an old propagandist, is be careful who you are told to blame for it. As a rough guide, always turn away from that which encourages you to hate. You are easier to control, when you are full of hate.

I scramble up and stand atop the mound, and I look out. The earth is soft and crumbling underfoot, hard to keep balance on. The moor is still black, fire-scented, but the rain has extinguished the curtains of blaze, at least those we can see. In places the peat goes down ten feet, and could be smouldering. The fire-crews have said to keep a lookout, and to avoid walking near the peat-hags for a time, lest one falls through into a fiery pit. Meanwhile, there are other fires needing their attention. Saddleworth. Bowland. Pendle. All are ablaze. Individual, local provision is cut back, so the councils are pooling fire-crews to make up a single, viable force, one on permanent alert, but still stretched too thin to be as thorough as it would like or indeed needs to be. Meanwhile London thrives of a fashion. Foreign owned supercars, gold plated, race along Oxford Street. Albion sinks.

There is talk of sending in the army to deal with the fires. They talk a lot about the army now. It calms the nerves of the old Empirists, while scaring the shit out of anyone with any common sense. Yet there is nothing the tabloids like more than to send in those knackered old green goddesses, even though they do not exist any more. But then, like all other symbols of the so-called golden

age, it does not stop them from being dredged into the service of crass headlines. I presume the journalists who harken back to these delusions are themselves quite old by now, and must retire eventually, or die, and therefore one day spare us their nonsense. But then the hacks coming up behind them seem not merely deluded, but actually malicious.

What is it, George? Why all this doom and gloom. It's like your fist day back at the office, after the summer holidays. Has a few days on the boat had such a dramatic effect on your psyche? What has Winona done to you?

Something is badly out of whack.

There is a note, pushed under the door of my rooms. It's from Ms Dodds. If I can call into the office tomorrow at 10:00, we can finalise transfer of the deeds of my father's house. Ah! This at least is progress, of a fashion.

There is also a text from Winona. She has navigated 20 miles without incident, moored the boat in a sunny spot for a few days to charge. She sends precise coordinates, using the new-fangled three word system. She has power, Mana, but I am able to influence her, I think. I need to be careful of my self there.

Amid the stench of burning, I eat a ready-meal purchased en route home, then I bathe, doze a little. And as the sun goes down, I consult the cards:

At last, you say: The Hermit, the five wands and the six cups.

Interesting, I say. Let me see:

The philosopher. Conflict and disharmony. The past revisited. Youth. Innocence. Such are the key-words the cards conjure.

Discord stands between where I am, and where I want to be. To compensate, I am projecting the sweet virginal essence of my own beginnings onto Winona. If I can let the past go, I free myself. And her.

Chapter Twenty Two

Staying alive

In which, we complete the legal transfer of my father's house, then inform Elaine of my intention to sell it. We consider asking her to dinner, then we might work a little more on the idea of falling in love with her. We meet Tamara again, twice – once by accident, and again when she suspects us of deception. She informs us of the death of an old friend, seeks information I do not have, seems suspiciously indiscreet with her questioning. So...

I am a little early for the solicitor's office, am invited by the receptionist to wait upon the deep cushioned sofa, the one that makes my arse sweat, and whose "vegan leather" covering rasps under my fidgeting, like I am farting. This embarrasses me. I focus down so I will keep very still. Ms Dodds, will not keep me long, I'm told. As I wait, I hear the sound of bonhomie coming from the head Honcho's office - this being the Patrician, remember? I wish I could tell you there was a Tarot card in his name, but there is not. His door opens and he bids a noisy farewell to his clients. He is a well brushed gentleman, nice charcoal suit, no tie. Something forgettably unfinished about him.

Ah. But wait...

There something else going on here. The client is Sir Joshua thingy-bob, whose last name, for now, eludes me – dammit, my memory is a nuisance these day, but, you know... he of the country house shenanigans, host to the county set, to mobsters and, lately, to spies, if he knows it or not. Wait, wait,... I have it. His name is Malone (KBE), that is: Knight Commander of the British Empire, as was, remember?

And holding onto his arm, looking very much like his squeeze, is Tamara. They are dressed to the nines, at ten in the morning, like they have an appointment at the registry office. I wonder if he knows how dangerous she is. Crooks like him think they're dangerous, but they're not. I've been to the school where Tamara learned to kill. Anyone who graduates from there is not the sort of person you want anywhere near your own person, let alone hanging onto your arm.

Sir Josh pretends not to notice me. I am not remembered, is his message. Tamara, of course, remembers, but I am not reassured by

that fact. I make no pretence at acquaintance, ignore them, including the Patrician who does not acknowledge me, even as a client in his rooms. There is something of a warning in the sudden hardness of Tamara's eyes that alarms me. It has me longing for the quiet comfort of my bunk, on the boat, under the command of my elven-eared skipper.

I am rescued – at least temporarily – by Ms Dodds. Fragrant, beautiful Ms Dodds, who I am supposed to be nurturing as my muse, but keep forgetting. Where were we with that? Ah, she turned out early on to be human, thus circumventing the usual muse-trap of wanton projection. She is smiling, head tilted, enquiringly and endearingly coquettish, eyes narrowing. She is friendly. Not flirting. She knows me now.

"You've been away, Mr Swift?"

"A few days with my canal boat. It's moored in the Midlands at the moment. I'm looking to bring it north."

"How lovely. I've never been on a canal boat. But they strike me as rather a boring way to spend the time."

Is that a smile? I think it is. She is playing with me. How sweet.

She might be rather fun, don't you think, George?

"Some would say that's the point of them. A slower way of life. We find entertainment, meaning, in smaller things, slower things. Like a sunset, or a game of cards. And there is nothing quite like tying up next to a quaint old inn, and enjoying a meal you have not cooked yourself on a recalcitrant supply of Calor-gas."

We laugh. Polite. Perfectly pleasant. But for all of that, am I dead to her? It's not just to you, George. It is to the whole world, the shine of it is tarnished for her, the taste of it soured by the mother who eats her children. Remember? My dear Ms Dodds, what is to be done about that? Can you be rescued? I doubt it. Not at your age, frankly. We are each marked early by such sins, and can never escape them.

Anyway, to business! A signature. The receptionist is called as witness. Confirmation will reach me by post etc. etc., and we're done, except, before I am dismissed, I think to ask: "Would you able to represent me in the sale of the house?"

"You've decided to sell?"

"I think I have, yes."

"Then, of course. The firm of Battecombe and Bailey will be delighted to represent you. Let us know when you want to proceed."

How formal. How stiff. Ask her to dinner perhaps? Do it now, George? No... the setting is too... too what? Too professional. It would not be seemly.

Business concluded, I make for the coffee shop, striding out like I have the devil on my heels. There, I sit at what has become my usual table, before remembering Winona no longer works there. The bastard owner, whom I now recognise as a bruiser with fake gang tats, dismissed her, most likely in response to a phone call from someone who holds sway over him. And who would that be, I wonder? Likely someone of the rentier class, since the property in which the cafe resides will also be – well – rented. And who whispered in *their* ear? And how can Winona possibly be considered so important, so dangerous, as all that? You said yourself, George, she has power. Why do you think others might not have noticed it too? Has Clive noticed? Is that what he is responding to here? Her *power*? What does he want with her? And where the hell is he with his explanation?

The bruiser comes to take my order, but I tell him I have changed my mind, and leave. I do this, I tell myself, in solidarity with Winona. Solidarity? Strange word, these days. Old word. Antiquated as Gadzooks! I shall find somewhere else for coffee, decide on a cafe out of town, where they are known for omelettes, since I am also, of a sudden, peckish. Sorry, I'm rambling, having one of my turns, possibly...

I return to the car to find Tamara has broken into it, defeated the alarm and is sitting, prim in the passenger seat. After the solicitor's office this morning, I had thought I might be seeing her again, but nothing so brazen as this. I hope she has not actually broken anything. I doubt she has. That would have been unprofessional.

"George, darling. You will explain please."

It is a command, not a question.

"Explain what, exactly?"

"Your presence at the firm of Battecombe and Bailey, solicitors at law, of course. Exactly."

"I told you... sorry. No. It wasn't you I told. I told Clive. I'm sorting out the legalities around my recently deceased father's house. He hasn't briefed you? Where is he? I need to speak to him."

"And you chose Battecombe and Bailey? Why?"

"Because they're the biggest firm in town, and my father's will is

registered with them, so it seemed a logical choice. You and 'Sir Josh' what's his name have business there as well? That's nothing to do with me. And on the same note, my being there this morning is nothing to do with anyone else. We never saw each other. Neither of us was ever there."

She thinks on this for a while. I fill the silence by asking: "How is Clive, by the way? The old bastard."

"Oh... you haven't heard? He's dead."

The earth opens and swallows me, caves in on top. "What?"

"You didn't know? Sorry. Oh... but then why would you? You're out the loop these days. I forget."

"Clive is *dead*?"

"Oh... don't look like that. It was nothing suspicious. Cardiac arrest. He'd had a good innings, and by the looks of him lately it was long overdue. Sorry. Sorry, heartless of me... I've been in this job too long. I know you liked him, though I can't think why. He treated you appallingly."

"He did? I always thought he was reasonable, compared with some."

"Really? You never felt you were held back in the ranks, while others were promoted ahead of you?"

"Well, obviously. But everyone feels like that. And what makes you think I didn't conspire along those same lines. I was always happy with my lot. And how would you know any of this? You've been going through my file? That's dull work for a razzle-dazzle girl like you."

"Oh, it was just a bit of gossip at the office. You know how it is."

"Tamara, by their very nature our offices do not gossip. You're trying to unsettle me. Why?"

"I'm just a little irritable this morning. Probably the company I'm keeping. You managed to remove the girl, like Clive told you?"

"As luck would have it, yes. But not before word of someone's bad mouth made her unemployable. God knows what she'll do in the future."

"That wasn't us, darling. There are other actors at play here. Not all of them are as nice as we are."

"I've just seen you with one of them."

"No, you didn't, remember? Like you said – you've not seen me, or him at all. And least of all me *with* him."

"Naturally. So... is that all you wanted to know?"

"Yes. You got the girl out. That's fine. That's what Clive wanted, though goodness knows why. And now he's not around to explain himself."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Different brief, Darling. We overlapped on the day, that's all, but none of my business, really."

"So that's it then? What am I supposed to do with her now?"

"Well, get rid of her. No, not like that. I mean... use your imagination, darling."

"How can I? Clive led me to believe she was in danger."

"Looks like you're stuck with her, then. Anyway, since we're here, so cosy and everything, tell me, how long have you been retired, George? Must be a few years, now?"

"Yes, it must be."

"Made a clean break, did you? Do you miss the work at all?"

"Is that a serious question, or a leading one? If you're being serious then, yes, I do miss the work. I felt useful, in a small way, but useful all the same. It's also frustrating how it's beyond me now. I can't even do the simplest of Suduko's."

"Poor you. But speaking of retirement, I know there are many in your position who slipped a few documents of interest onto a memory stick before you went. Sneaked it out. A memento, you know? You wouldn't have done that, would you? Oh, I don't mean secret stuff – that would be silly, and not all like you. Just... you know... bits and bobs. You can fit a lot of bits and bobs on a memory stick these days, can't you. A lifetime of labours. Indeed, several lifetimes."

"What is this? I walked out with nothing but the clothes I stood up in, as per the rules. Neither am I writing a novel about how appallingly I was treated – which I wasn't by the way. So... is there something specific in my past labours that's of interest to you? Has something gone *missing*, and you're hoping someone still has a lazy copy of it somewhere? Or do you really think I might have stolen something? Something related to... whatever this is about."

She ignores the questions. "So, you've nothing like that, then? Something you may have worked on? I mean recently."

"Tamara, however you cut it, recently means years ago. And anyway, no, I didn't take anything with me. Absolutely not. Security was my middle name. In thirty five years I never had a single breach. Not one. If you've had someone go through my records,

you'll know that."

She looks glum for a moment, then brightens in that false way she has. "Oh, yes. A safe pair of hands, is old George, they tell me. A bit dull, a bit of a lefty, too, but not a bad sort."

"Well, thank God for that."

"Indeed. So, I'll be on my way. I seem to recall I owe you a date, sometime. Are you still up for that?"

"Will I have any choice?"

"Oh... George, you're such a wag. But I'll be in touch. Well done by the way. Seriously. I mean the girl. You must keep her safe. I presume someone else up the chain knows why, and will be in touch. I'm sure it helps enormously. And don't underestimate yourself. I have tremendous confidence in you."

"She's harmless. No threat to anyone."

"Yes, Darling. But others are less inclined to trust. And life is so cheap now. But aside from Clive's mystery request, you're not curious at all? I mean about what's going on here?"

"I'm never curious about things that do not concern me."

"But what does concern you? What does George Swift get out of bed for in the mornings, now, I wonder."

"Seriously?"

"Ever so much, Darling."

"I'm searching for the meaning of my life."

"Oh? And have you come to any conclusions about that?"

"So far as I can tell, it varies, depending on one's age. There are three stages. At my stage, the meaning of life is death."

"Oh, how morbid. Dear me. And mine?"

"Yours would be staying alive, Tamara."

"Well, I'm all for that. I'll be in touch. Bye, darling."

She blows a kiss, and is gone.

Chapter Twenty Three

Skin on skin

In which we discuss the abiding fantasy of Empire, which still prevails in certain quarters of the elite, in spite of clear evidence to the contrary. We consider the avaricious nature of the gentry, in the face of its decline, and advise against taking to heart a darkness we can do nothing about. We speak of Tamara's indiscretion, and wonder if we are in danger of being drawn back into her world, or if she is in danger of being drawn into ours. We consider the nature of her world and its eternally false premises. Elaine corners us in our rooms, with wine, where we discuss mothers, sex, and marriage. She makes an unexpected proposal. So...

News of Clive's death troubles me. The memory of our last meeting haunts me, too. Might we not have parted on more personable terms than that? He was not old enough to have been of the generation ahead of me, more the advanced guard of my own beleaguered cohort. But such is the nature of his particular business, and of course Tamara's, and to a lesser extent mine, of course. It requires a certain coldness of the blood. I never was cut out for it, and I pitied those who were.

Still, we had in common a clear, though somewhat inaccurate, and simplified version of the world, him right to the very end. I rejected it around midlife when the world's immense complexity finally dawned on me, and I have spent the years since, both in and out of the service, seeking a much broader view. But in doing so, I am brought only face to face with the corruption from within my own former ranks. We have lived this fantasy for so long, this fantasy of Empire, even throughout the century of its obvious demise, and to the point where we can barely muster fuel for ships to fly the flag any further than the Solent. I had thought others, wiser than me, were wise to this also. But it seems they weren't, or, for some reason, must go on pretending.

And now there is only this vile, Conradian scramble, for the loot that remains. But that is not *my* story, not *this* story. It captivates, I know. It distracts. It tempts one to become all shouty-caps on Twitter. DAMMIT. But there is no wisdom there. As I was saying to Tamara, I am never curious about that which does not concern me. Only The Secret beyond all secrets concerns me now, and the clue

to that is not to be found among the flotsam and the jetsam of failed geopolitics.

Tamara?

I would say she is no longer of an age to still be seeking her meaning in the illusion of all that nonsense. I sensed this in her on the previous occasion, when we first met, but recognise it would be dangerous to sound her out. Indeed it would be dangerous to reside anywhere in her sphere at all, for spies are the most singular of the species. They are actors, lost in the roles they play, even unto themselves. They are, as needs must, amoral and deadly. Rather cold souls, then, no matter what persona they happen to be wearing at the time. As for the gist of what passed between us in the car, I don't know. It had to be more than idle chatter. It was to do with something I have worked on, she said. Or rather she did not say, exactly. But by not saying it, she said it all the louder, and, knowing her profession, that was more by design than accident.

But, heavens, it could be anything.

She refers, no doubt, to something that was lost, or deleted by incompetence, and most likely not even read by others at the time it was intended to be read, like so much of my analysis wasn't. And even then, what wasn't read would have been consigned to oblivion when they erased my account on the servers, as per procedure. And now some dozy old duffer has asked the question: *oh, didn't old Swifty once put something together on that?*

My memory of those times, being what it is now, I've no chance of guessing it, and no interest in doing so anyway. Perhaps the Brownies who dwell in the unconscious depths will help me out, if they think it necessary. But they have a much different agenda when it comes to what they see fit to remind me of, these days, and what they choose to withhold.

I hope Tamara is of a mind to forget her promise of a date, then, in case she intends pressing me on it further. I have not the wits to survive such an encounter. Never had. When those pretty ladies approached us, the junior, and the often virgin ranks, of the foreign service, I was the first to go running to my superiors. Others thought they were smart enough to make a game of it, and got burned, for spies will always burn you. But it strikes me there is no cover from the dubious machinations of one's own service. And when one's own country feels like a foreign and hostile territory, where is one to call home?

Where indeed?

I am back at the farm, now. The sun is setting over the newly built ramparts, which one must now scale if one wishes to see the hills beyond. Either that or I must retreat to my upstairs rooms, and view them through the window, which is what I am doing, now. It does indeed resemble an ancient British encampment, effective against the sticks and stones of an earlier age. But such defences were lost quickly to the superior technology of the invading Roman empire with their devillish ballistae. Now there are no empires to speak of, yet the threats are more deadly. Empires, imagined or otherwise, have no defence against them at all.

Meanwhile, the sash rattles its Morse-code – a trembling hand tonight. Emergency. SOS. Voices of souls tossed at sea. And further out we have planets, across the galaxy extinguished, one by one by one, their atmospheres occluded by their own smoke, shutting out suns. They die the usual heat death, and drowning – fate of all civilisations, who champion the alpha, over the beta. The singular over the communal. The left over the right brain.

A tree falls alone in the forest.

It makes no sound.

Were we ever here at all, I wonder.

Days pass.

I don't recall what I was doing between times, but I am here again, at the desk, looking out upon the sunset, as if I had never moved. A message from Winona pierces my introspection, and brings a moment of light. She is moored on the south side of an urban stretch, now, ready to push through to greener moorings tomorrow, has made another twenty miles and all is ship-shape. I have advised her to avoid urban moorings, and am relieved she is doing so. Trolls are attracted to decay, and to water. It's where they hide the bodies. The sight of a prettily painted boat is often enough to goad them into profanity and violence. Her progress alarms me though. At this rate she will be in Middleton in a month. And then what shall I do with her?

There comes a gentle tapping at the door, which I have propped open to let in some air. I turn from the window, from my desk, to see Ms Dodds framed in the light of the hallway. She carries two glasses, and a bottle of wine. She shows me her slender profile, hair unfastened, tumbling in comely fashion, almost as far as the alluring curve of the hip. Why can I not fall in love with her, like I

am supposed to do? Why do women not move me that way any more? This is one hell of a woman, at least until she speaks of the mother.

And then she is pathetic.

"Ah, Ms Dodds. Good evening."

She smiles, something middling warm in it. Or is she just hesitant? Is she afraid of me, afraid to disturb?

How odd.

"This reminds me of being in halls," she says.

"Halls?"

"University, Mr Swift. We would prop open our doors in halls to invite company of an evening."

"Ah... then your halls must have been more salubrious than mine, Ms Dodds. I would never for shame have invited company into mine. And so far as I recall my fellow students, I would not have wanted their company anyway."

"Please... call me Elaine."

Ah... Elaine, now, is it?

She twinkles and tinkles the glasses in the light, raises a brow in query. Do I drink? Yes... yes, I do. I have given up so many things over the years it's hard to keep track. Meat? Sex? But alcohol is not one of them. "We're celebrating?"

"The completion of your father's house? I thought..."

"Ah... yes. Of course. Well, in the absence of anything more worthy, that will suffice. Do please come in. I'm sorry, my rooms resemble something of a monkish cell."

"Not at all. I like the minimalism. There's nothing worse than an excess of possessions, don't you think? Anyway, I rather suspect your sense of home is somewhat adrift just now."

"And you would be right."

"Me too. We're both drifting, then."

She seeks fellowship in a harmony of disharmonious circumstance? How interesting. I pull up a comfortable chair for her, and she sits. "You have a nicer view than I do," she says.

"Ah, yes... it's what sold me on the room. The view. The sunset. As you say, I'm somewhat adrift at the moment, but it's pleasant here."

"Not for settling in, though?"

"No. For the longer term, I would prefer my own moated castle, and drawbridge."

She pours. One glass. Then two. All the while she is thinking, judging. My, what a mind at work! Can we not at least admire her, George?

Yes... yes. I think we can do that. Of course we can. She is an admirable creature.

"George, my advice, as a friend, rather than a solicitor's clerk, is that, on reflection, I advise against your using the firm of Battecombe and Bailey, I mean, when it comes to selling your father's house, if that's what you intend doing."

This is news. "Oh?"

"Merrills is a good firm." She hands me a card. "You know Merrills?"

"They're across the street from you. A competitor."

"Competitor? Well, I suppose so. I know the people there. They're a good team. It's up to you of course. But I probably won't be with the firm for much longer. I can't say why – certain... well. Things."

"Oh? You intrigue me, Elaine."

"No. Don't be intrigued. Just go with Merrills, when the time comes. Battecombe and Bailey seem... well... distracted by other matters at the moment. I'm not sure you would get the attention you deserve."

"They have bigger fish to fry? Meaning a little property conveyancing may get lost in the cracks?"

"Indeed. Quite so."

She lies well. I don't know why she's warning me away from her firm. But, knowing now, as I do, that it deals with the likes of Joshua Malone, perhaps it is to protect me.

"Very well. I shall. You're leaving you say?"

"Moving to a little place just north of Newcastle, I think. Mother is... well... more difficult to manage recently. It's easier if I'm nearer. Well, not easier *exactly*, just less time consuming."

"I see. When will you go?"

"Not for a while yet, possibly the New Year."

I venture a personal question: "Your mother lives alone?"

"In a care home, though she doesn't mix much with the others. So, yes, she's pretty much on her own, most of the time. She had a nice house, by the coast, but it was sold to pay for her care. Two years, and the care-home has already divested her of all her capital, commandeered her pension, and all in exchange for a grubby

regime of neglect and incompetence.

"It makes me angry to think of it, George. It was my father's money. Sixty years of work and risk, and now swallowed by... by what? They are no better than thieves."

This, I'm thinking from a woman who works for a solicitor who charges a higher hourly rate than a surgeon, and has the client running around doing most of the work. But I digress. I seem to be disengaging from the world. And as I disengage I float above it. I gain a different perspective. Nonetheless, the door I want to open remains closed.

Where were we? Ah... Ms. Dodds' mother's avaricious care-home. The mother again...

"It's the nature of the times, I'm afraid, Elaine."

Platitudes, George. Can you not be more genuinely sympathetic? This woman is sincere in her complaint, and she is looking for a listener, if she denies it or not. Perhaps she is looking for more than that. Dare we even guess she might be looking for an admirer. Look closely, then. Is there nothing about this woman that might endear her to you – I mean physically? Well... indeed, there is plenty. She has an heroic sort of face, defiant lower lip, and set of the jaw, all this atop a slender neck, proud shoulders. Breasts? Yes, yes, I can see she has breasts, but lets not linger there. Curvaceous dip of the waist? True. All true, but, try as I might, I cannot objectify her, cannot rouse myself to passion over such things.

Oh dear.

I watch as a wry smile forms. "Still," she says. "Mother always did enjoy having something to complain about. But I'm the one having to do battle with the management."

"And there's no possibility she could be moved to a home nearer to wherever you are?"

"Oh... she'd never agree to that. That would be to have *me* at the centre of *her* life, rather than the other way around." She shakes her head as if to wake herself. "Sorry. I didn't mean to talk about any of this."

"No, really, like I said before, sometimes it helps. A problem shared and all that."

"You're very kind. But let's talk about something else. Let's talk about you... You're retired, you say. You're a little young for that, I'm thinking."

"Well, I went early, mainly on health grounds. But it was always

the plan, to escape while the going was good, so to speak."

"Nothing serious, I hope? The health grounds, I mean – not my business. Sorry."

"No, no. Nothing serious. More a sort of mental burnout, than physical."

I'm evasive. Why? Have I not already blown my cover by hinting to Winona the nature of my former business, and my affliction? Why not include Elaine Dodds in this same circle of trust? Because she does not need to know. I told Winona because I needed to gain her trust. Ergo, Winona means more to me than I believe, at the moment, Elaine Dodds is ever likely to. Strange thought, that, George. Is it that with Winona the deal is existential, and with Elaine, it is most likely business as usual?

"I could do with a long weekend away," she says.

Her glass is empty already. So is mine. She tops us up.

"And no phone," I suggest.

"And a lover half my age," she adds, raises her glass in salute at her suggestion. She's laughing, now. It's all right. We are old enough to say such things, without innuendo. Or rather we might play with the fire of innuendo, without the risk of getting burned.

"Ah, yes. I'll drink to that. The glory of youthful passion, half our lifetimes ago. What a wonderful thought. A lover half your age." Note I do not say a lover half of mine, and mainly because I have a picture of Winona in my head as I raise the glass. Clearly, I still have some work to do there before I am out of danger.

"Well, I'd mainly do it to spite my mother. Rub her nose in it."

Back to the mother.

The wine is loosening our tongues, and our reserve – as, I presume was her intent. Clearly this is not the best way for anyone to live their life, always with the feel of someone's eyes on their back, judging. And especially a parent. The need to win approval becomes obsessive, and is rarely worth it. I suspect Elaine has spent her entire life in this awful fix. She remains unmarried, because in any marriage the man would find himself wedded to both Elaine and the mother. There is much more I could say on that score, but do not.

"What would you advise, George?"

"Oh... I'd hesitate to advise anyone, Elaine. My life's path is not exactly the result of wise counsel."

"Well, what would your cards tell me?

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely."

Yes. Yes, she means this absolutely. So think carefully George. Answer truthfully.

"Oh, well... that's easy. Forget your mother, and live your life as if she did not exist. We are under no obligation to continue our association with those who are harmful to us, be they blood nor not. Our respect, our love must be earned, and freely given. It cannot be extorted from us by means of emotional blackmail."

She knows this. But still, she is trapped by it, by blood, and therefore beyond rescue. She has become myth. She is a story. She really is Hansel and Gretel.

"Well said. Indeed. Thank you for your honesty, George." And then rather unexpectedly: "Will you marry me?"

We are joking, remember, and slightly drunk. This is not a romance. "Oh, I rather doubt your mother would approve of me. But thank you for the offer. That's the nicest thing anyone has asked me in a very long time."

She slices a wry smile. Not exactly joking, then? She is probing in some way. "A definite 'no', then?"

"Not definite. Absolutely not. I have no clear convictions, Elaine. I am open to all possibilities, but I suspect if you knew me a little better..."

"Well, indeed. And if you knew me a little better, you'd be running a mile. And it wouldn't solve anything. It's funny, don't you think? I mean how all the stories end with boy marries girl, as if we find the meaning of life in the act of one little piece of skin rubbing against another."

"Ah, well, quite."

Skin rubbing against skin?

It is with some effort I avoid choking on my wine, and spluttering it out.

She is quoting Marcus Aurelius, that grand old stoic.

Coincidence?

Remember, Winona and I were speaking of him recently, on the boat. He had something similar to say in his meditations, as I recall. Perhaps this is where Elaine got it from. And the result of it? a convulsion and the ejection of a mere thimbleful of cloudy mucus. Yet, so much of our lives are held in thrall to it, or to the promise of it, as if in its excretion was contained the key to The Secret beyond

all secrets. But no, the key does not lie there, not between the pieces of skin, nor the pubis, bone to bone, nor in those wriggly things and their defiant swim.

And afterwards?

Well... nothing.

What to say now? "Em... as an alternative, so to speak... I recommend the sea-side."

"Oh?"

"For your weekend away. Nothing like a bit of sea air. A nice hotel, mind. One where they'd treat you like a goddess."

She laughs at that. "I've not been abroad since the pandemic, George. My passport is getting on for a decade expired by now. Goodness knows what I've been doing. It really did shred all our lives for a time, didn't it? Indeed, I never quite got back on my feet entirely. Perhaps you're right. I should make the effort and renew it."

"Well, there are many fine resorts abroad, of course. But also plenty at home, if you know where to look."

"Well... I beg to differ. We don't do hospitality at all well, in my experience. Like my mother's care home, we're forced to pay a fortune to be insulted, and belittled at every turn. Perhaps if we were millionaires..."

The mother again. There are always three people in the conversation with Elaine.

"Ah... Elaine, you need a good pampering. I recommend a spa treatment. I recommend you be massaged in aromatic oils, and to within an inch of your life. Then dinner, drinks and dance. Then a walk on the beach by moonlight, bare-foot."

What?

Since when did you become so eloquent, so silver-tongued, George? If we did not know any better we would say you were flirting with her. Well why not? She started it.

However, she counters with a solid defence: "And a thick cardigan, too, no doubt."

"A what? Oh, well, if it's chilly of course, but we're enjoying such a warm spell just now. Too warm, actually."

"And I would prefer Wellington boots, if you don't mind, instead of bare feet. In case of jelly fish, I mean. Such a lot of jelly-fish now on the English beaches, what with the seas getting warmer, don't you think?"

Jelly fish? She has a point there. No more the miles of golden, virgin sand we knew as children. Now there are indeed disgusting jelly fish, washed up, and festering between each tide, to say nothing of the plastic litter, and excrement, courtesy of our post European deregulation. "Wellington boots? A very sensible precaution."

Pause. A look. Another slice of a smile, ever so brief. A modicum of mutual understanding, perhaps?

"Were you ever married, George?"

"What? No. I'm afraid the nature of my work made it difficult to find the right woman."

"Oh? And what would have been the right woman – for you?"

"Good question. Old fashioned, patient, nurturing..." Really, George? Yes, *absolutely*.

"And would you have wanted children?"

"Yes, as many as the fates were disposed to permit. However, we are where we are, and no regrets."

"Sons or daughters?"

"Em... daughters, I think."

Deflect her quickly George. She has you on the ropes, and you are in danger of sweating. "And you, Elaine? Were you ever married?"

"For all of five minutes."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that."

"That I was married?"

"That it was only for five minutes."

What are we talking about, now? Well, we are freewheeling. We are free associating, while the penny rolls towards the arcade slot. And which slot is that, George? The one that pays out with the tinkle of coin, or the one that falls into the void?

"I would like that George. You're right. It's exactly what I need."

"I'm sorry?"

Now I'm totally lost, and ready in fact, for bed.

"A weekend in a spa hotel, by the sea," she reminds me." Shall we make arrangements then? Is there somewhere you have in mind?"

"Em..."

Strange the way things work out. Strange the way language can lead us down avenues we did not set out to explore, not deliberately anyway. But there are currents in the unconscious, you see? The

Brownies at work. There are things that drive the imagination, and they can manifest as subtle flags and steerage, even against the strongest of tides, especially if it's a two way thing. What am I talking about? It seems I have just agreed to a weekend away with Ms Elaine Dodds.

How did that happen?

"Yes... yes, indeed. I know just the place." Indeed, I do! "Not by the sea, though. By a lake. There are no jelly fish in our lakes.."

But I take heed of Marcus Aurelius, as does Ms Dodds, I hope. Ergo... neither of us are seeking the meaning of life in sex, nor indeed are we seeking sex for the mere pleasure of it, which, from our perspective of long years – it has to be said – is somewhat over-rated. It is more the company, and the conversation that attracts her, I presume. Anything else, after all I have said here, would be unthinkable. It would also be to have recklessly tempted fate.

It's a pity she finds canal boats tedious. A few days cruise might be all she needs.

Except, I am forgetting, my boat is already occupied.

Chapter Twenty Four

Failing upwards

In which my neighbour disappears, and we must rush to Winona's aid. Tamara invites me to a meeting, during which my relationship with Elaine Dodds is mentioned in more than passing terms. We meet a former junior – and rather incompetent – member of the service, now much risen in the ranks, and Tamara considers the situation sufficiently grave she offers me a gun. So...

I wake to the sound of a bulldozer. Jasmine is now having the defences levelled, the ditches filled, and the view of the moors restored. This confuses me, having accepted their loss only the night before. The works look likely to take all day, so I return to Marsden, to my father's house. I am thinking to pull weeds, and check for mail. There are, and is, none. What there is instead, or rather *are*, are the bull-lurchers, lying in next door's front yard, in pools of their own blood, and with the majority of their heads missing, or rather splattered across the wall beneath the bay window.

The giant pick-up truck has gone. There is a crowd gathering to observe this gruesome spectacle, and I wonder if anyone has called the police. Then I hear sirens, and assume they have. I rather wish I'd sneaked away at this point, but that would have been to draw more attention to myself than by hanging around.

It takes a while to explain to the constables, and then again to the detectives that, yes, technically, it is my house, this house next door to the scene of carnage, but that no, I do not live here, that I live elsewhere and, no, I do not know my neighbour at all well, and no, I did not see or hear anything, because I was away, living elsewhere. I only come around on occasion to do the garden and to see to the mail, you see?

While the officers glaze over, wondering perhaps if I am obfuscating, I receive a text from Winona. She is moored just short of a tunnel, now, and she's sorry but dare not enter – something vaginal about it, she says, meaning in the Freudian sense. I presume she is joking. She has mastered the locks, the mooring, the fuelling and just about everything else, but no, she finds she cannot enter the tunnel alone.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes... sorry. A friend of mine. Em... something to deal with

later. You were saying?"

"When was the last time you spoke to your neighbour?"

"It was weeks ago. He asked after my father. Then offered me cash for the house, when I said I might be selling."

"A lot of money, that. Cash, I mean."

"Oh, yes... yes, indeed. I can't imagine what that much cash looks like, though I supposed he meant it would be done by bank transfer. Not actual... you know... bank notes."

"It didn't make you suspicious at all? That amount of money in cash."

"That he was some sort of criminal, you mean? Well, that much seems obvious to anyone who's met him. So much cash as that, though? It would make him a drug dealer, possibly? I don't know. But suspicious, no. Way of the world, isn't it? And as regards the origins of the money, I presume the solicitors would ensure due diligence was observed."

"You don't seem surprised though, sir."

"Surprised by?..."

"The incident next door."

"Well, neither do you. But then I presume you already know his business, and turn a blind eye to it."

Better the devil you know, than the even more evil bastard who might replace him.

He does not deny this, changes the subject. "Oh... well... it's a pity about the dogs, don't you think? Fine pair of dogs, those."

Ah, so, he is a dog lover. The English do love a dog. Fine dogs, were they?

"From a certain perspective, I suppose. From another, they were terrifying brutes, and had a taste for warm blood. I suspect, therefore they were a danger to old people and small children. Is he dead too? I mean, I presume this is some sort of turf war, or a revenge thing, when crooks fall out. He's not lying in a pool of blood indoors is he?"

"Ah, no, nothing like that. We're simply anxious to trace his whereabouts."

Then he was also a police informant? A what-do-they-call-them, these days? CHIS, is it? Good Lord, who would have known it?

"Well, that's very reassuring, officer. Someone must have heard something, though. Dogs shot like that. It would have woken the whole street."

"One would think so."

Yes, but they'll need an underworld snitch to inform them of it. And it looks like theirs has copped it, or legged it. The rest of us are too scared to say anything, even if we know it, because we don't trust the cops to have the resources to keep us safe from the likes of the pebble eyed man, CHIS or not, and his kind any more. Better to pay protection, and keep our mouths shut if we want to see our old age. That's the way it goes at this stage of the game, you see? You've perhaps not realised it yet, and I'm sorry to break it to you this way. Anyway, dammit. It looks like I can say goodbye to a quick sale on the house.

But none of this is important, remember?

When the cops have gone, I send a reply to Winona: "Position please?"

I get the three word code back, and compute I can probably be there by tea time, so drive to the railway station. I have a bag in the car at all times. Kit for a few days, a little cash. Habit. It seems I am still at least partially functional.

No, I'm not sorry about the dogs. That's an awful thing for an Englishman to say, I know, and I am sorry, *truly*, if it offends your sensibilities. It is a cliche, we think more of dogs, or other furry creatures, than of our fellow man. I suspect it's something to do with our collective tendency towards emotional repression, a kind of pathological sentimentality. We find it easier to emote, to project onto dogs, make children, or little furry men of them, than to develop any meaningful empathy towards people. I also remind you other cultures eat dogs, and that to be disgusted by the idea is only to reveal your cultural bigotry. Indeed, I have eaten a dog myself, in Vietnam – not a whole one, of course. Also, I suspect in South Korea, though I did not know it at the time – not being familiar with the basic lingo – and I suspect my guide was pulling my leg. Indeed, it rather changes one's perspective. Either way, it was delicious – though it depends of course on the preparation and, to be fair, on both occasions it was liberally spiced.

So anyway, trains south. I am consulting the app on the station car-park, now. Change at Crewe, then Wolverhampton... and then... okay,... it's perfectly doable, barring train breakdowns, which I have to say are something of a feature of our travel nowadays. But we'll see. Winona and tunnels? Understandable of course. They are intimidating sections of the waterways. The Freudian angle troubles

me, still. Winona and vaginas? I grab the bag from the boot.

"Would you mind coming with us, sir?"

"What?"

A pair of bruisers, hands crossed over their genitals, blocking my way. They have the look of officials about them, or rather the muscled gophers of officials. They offer no identification, and clearly carry concealed weapons. This is obvious when you know what to look for.

"Am I being kidnapped, gentlemen?"

"Just a chat, sir."

I'm wondering if this has anything to do with a follow up regarding my disappeared neighbour, but then one of them indicates the open rear door of a blacked out four by four, of the type favoured by fictional TV super-criminals. Inside, Tamara is sitting pretty, looking thoughtful, while also looking at me. Is this her official guise, then? Are these governmental gophers? Or is she playing her game, in which case these will be gentlemen of ambiguous loyalties. I'd better say nothing, until she does, and take my lead from her.

Dammit. No... don't mince your words, George.

All right then... *fuck!*

We're on the M6, fast lane, heading south at warp speed. Since it's in the general direction I was originally intending to travel by train, I do not complain.

She speaks. "Some people would like a word, George. Nothing to worry about, darling."

"People? Would these be old friends, or new?"

"Oh, strictly old time's sake, George."

The service then.

"I've told you everything I know, which isn't much, I admit but... but that's because I don't know much. Indeed, I don't know anything."

"Oh, quite. It's not an interrogation, darling. Something else has come up. You might be able to help clarify it, that's all. Don't fret so. I'll see to it you're looked after. I have your back. And a very broad back I note. I suspect you're quite muscled for a man of your years."

"Oh, Tamara, *please*. Where are we going? I have a friend who's in trouble, and I desperately need to be elsewhere."

"We're about an hour's drive, that's all. Anything we can do to

help your friend in the mean time?"

"I rather doubt it." Meaning, of course, I wouldn't trust you.

"Settle in then. You're being awfully good about this. It won't take a moment of your time, I promise."

An hour's drive becomes two. Our destination is an industrial unit in the East Midlands. We drive right in. I suppose I should be grateful I was not blindfolded. It's hot inside the unit, and smells of fresh paint. There is a line of armoured vehicles with water cannon atop, of the kind they favour for crowd-control in other countries. They are an impressive sight, but I had thought they were unauthorised for use here. Simply not British, or cricket, or something.

"You're expecting serious unrest, by the looks of these things. Mind you, I've been expecting that for some time."

"Oh, I wouldn't know. There's an office here we use occasionally, that's all. I suppose these things are just *in case*. And we have to keep them somewhere, don't we?"

There's a man in the office. Suited, young, rather stern of face. I recognise him as a junior officer from my Hong Kong days. He was fresh out of Oxford then, void of ideas, emotionally vacant, and similarly lacking in intelligence. But he was kept afloat, as per his type, on the abundant helium of inappropriate self confidence.

I recall he was compromised within weeks of his arrival, by a very pretty young lady in the service of the North Koreans. He was expedited home with his tail very much between his legs – also, it was rumoured with a nasty dose of gonorrhoea. I had thought at the time: poor bugger, there goes his career. But apparently not. What was his name? Hell, it escapes me, as does so much these days. I shall call him for convenience here: "The Schoolboy".

He does not remember me. The bastard. He even scrounged an Asprin from me one morning after an ill advised binge the night before.

"You're late," he says – this I presume to Tamara.

"Terribly sorry," she says. She deploys a subtle inflection in her tone, one in which I fancy I am sensitive enough to hear her cutting out his heart and nailing it to the wall. My sympathies are with her, though I'm well aware it would take very little for me to suffer the same fate.

He hears nothing. Sees nothing. Knows nothing.

"Sit."

I sit.

Tamara and the bruisers take seats by the wall, behind me, I presume to correct my rudeness, should I attempt to leave the room before the schoolboy is done talking at me. I note he does not look at people when he speaks. He learned this on a training course. I recall I did the same one, but there is a fashion to these things, and I suspect he is out of date, now. Why do I remember that, when I cannot remember his name? Come on, Swifty. What's his *name*?

"The nature of your relationship with Elaine Dodds," he says. "Chapter and verse."

Ah! Unexpected turn, that. They want to know about *Elaine*, now? Have I misjudged her? Whatever has she done to attract the attention of The Service?

"She was my solicitor – or clerk, rather. I explained all of this to Tamara."

"You did, George," says Tamara. "Chapter and verse."

Thank you, Tamara.

"Yes, yes, your father's house and all that," says the schoolboy. "But it's not the full story, is it?"

"Isn't it? I rather thought it was. Well... we're also both renting rooms at the same place, if that's what you mean. Purely by coincidence."

"What I mean, George, is there's a serious operation ongoing at the moment, and you keep popping up all over it."

"I assure you it's not my intention. You seem to be operating all over the place where I happen to have been born, and am currently living. That's the measure of it. As for the nature of my relationship with Ms Dodds, there is none beyond what I have already said, and that is all there is to it."

And surely, all operations are "serious", or they are not approved funding, unless it's something to do with channelling funds into pockets of the great and the goodness me.

"I'll ask you again. What is the nature of your relationship with Elaine Dodds."

This likely to be a tedious meeting. "And I repeat, *none*, other than what I have already told you."

But wait, George. Are they listening to her 'phone? Were they listening to us last night? Heavens this *is* tiresome. All I'm interested in these days is the secret, beyond all secrets, and how to find the trigger that will enable me to believe in it. All of this other stuff... it's just so... distracting.

"Well... if you insist on stretching things, we've talked a little. I mean personally. Talked last night, actually. But nothing very deep and meaningful. To say we have a relationship is rather overstating matters."

"That's a pity."

A pity? Did I hear that right? A pity for whom? "Well... I'm sorry... but there we are."

"We'd like you to develop one," says the schoolboy.

Ah, now we're getting to it. "Develop a relationship? What sort of relationship?"

"An intimate relationship."

"You want me to *befriend* her?"

"Well, if you could fuck her, that might be a little near the mark, George. A little more *conducive*, shall we say? Pillow talk, and all that."

I dislike his tone, to say nothing of the ready use of the vulgar vernacular, and especially in the context of a discussion about Elaine. Indeed, I'm terribly old fashioned about things like that.

"I'm sorry? Conducive? To what? You do know I've never worked operationally, don't you? In the field, I mean. That was never my bag at all. I wouldn't know the first thing. I would be a... an... what's the word I'm searching for here, Tamara?"

"An operational liability, George?"

That's my girl! "Indeed, an operation *liability*."

The schoolboy makes a show of consulting his notes. "A little young for retirement, aren't you?"

"Meaning what?"

"At the discretion of the service, wasn't it?"

"Shortly after having my brains fried in the line of duty, and rendering me useless as an analyst, yes. You're what? Threatening me, now? You'll have my pension withdrawn, if I don't seduce Elaine Dodds and squeeze her pips? Is that the gist of your pitch, here? I'm sorry to be so blunt about it, young man, but my mind is not what it was, and cannot play those sorts of nudge-nudge, wink-wink games any more. Please be more direct. Words of one syllable please, and I shall reciprocate in kind."

Did I really say all of that, like that? I mean in *that* tone? Lord, I suppose I did. And no, he did not appreciate being called a young man. Yes, I do act like Methuselah sometimes, which can be a bit tedious, and he's not that much younger than me, but still... direct

hit, George, old boy!

"I'm sure George will do his best," says Tamara. There is a titter in her tone. I think she appreciated the joke, though I do not like the implication she believes this is already a done deal. So...

Thank you, Tamara. However...

"No, I bloody well won't. You're after what? Intelligence from that solicitor's office, I suppose? Look, Elaine won't be working there much longer. There's something about the place that's offended her – that's all I know. She's moving to Newcastle, to be near her mother. The mother is all you need to know, if you want to understand Elaine Dodds."

But they already know this, George.

"You'd better move fast, then," says the schoolboy. He shuts his file, stands. The interview is over. "Tamara will be your contact."

I'm sure they can indeed interfere with my pension. You can do anything with computers and corrupt officials these days. But he's bluffing. Such a thing would require signing off at the highest level. Higher than him at any rate. There would need to be a risk assessment. Risk of embarrassment and said signatories still being in post at the time any scandal breaks. But can you take that chance, George? And there are any number of other ways they can make things difficult for you.

Now what? He's leaving? They drove me two hours, for this? The bruisers stand to a kind of sloppy attention. Tamara remains steadfastly, nonchalantly and disrespectfully seated. It's hard not to warm to her when she's like that. Like what, George? Sullenly disrespectful of authority. And sexy? Oh... yes... I suppose so. Tamara is very sexy, and she uses it well.

His name comes to me, at last: "Singleton. Jordan Singleton."

There is nothing like the speaking of another's name for pulling them up. They can be walking away, or talking at you ten to the dozen. Say their name and they will stop. It's a psychological thing. Try it. He stops. I plough on. "Hong Kong. '96. I thought I recognised you. My those were heady days, Singleton. You've forgotten me, I suspect. But I remember you. Blaze of glory, that, old boy. Blaze of glory!"

He has no answer, seems satisfyingly embarrassed, and walks out. The bruisers follow. Tamara gives me a smile, dimples and all, shrugs, stands. I stand for her.

"I'm sorry, Tamara. But my shagging days are over. And I mean

really."

"Oh, darling. Don't say that. You're just out of practice that's all."

"There's no way I can do it. I like Elaine. She has some very endearing ways... she's... a *lady*, if you'll forgive my old fashioned manners. So, you see, I cannot..."

"Yes, you can. And you *must*. Look, it's clear you were developing a relationship anyway, though I had rather hoped you'd be saving yourself for me. But hey-ho, King and country and all that, and we can always pick that up when this is over. So, for now, just carry on as you are. But just... pick up the pace a bit."

"In the full knowledge you're listening to her, to us, through her 'phone. Right? And mine, probably."

"Well, of course. Hers yes. Yours no – you're being terribly clever about that, but then I would expect no less. Anyway, if that particular detail troubles you, you know what to do about it."

"But we're not carrying on in *that* way."

"Does *she* know that? You don't know women very well, darling. She might be horribly disappointed, even insulted, if you don't at least try to seduce her. I know I would. As for the information we're after, any old scraps will do, but preferably client lists. Anything and everything she has access to. So... now let's get you back home."

"Home? Thank you all the same, but I'm roughly in the part of the world where I need to be, actually. If you can drive me into the nearest town where I can get a train, I'd appreciate it. Listen, Tamara..."

"Hmm?"

"You didn't have my neighbour killed, did you? And his dogs?"

"Lord no, George. Your neighbour was *murdered*?"

"I don't know. His dogs were killed, certainly. Shot at close range, I'd say. He's disappeared. The cops are looking for him."

"Well, that wasn't us. Do you feel under threat? This sounds very serious. You think they might have been looking for you? I can authorise a weapon, if you like. I believe you're a good shot."

"No... I wasn't meaning that. I just wondered... so many things seem connected these days, that's all."

"Well, not this time. Come on. We'll drop you wherever you want. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"You'd like some training for your assignment."

"Training? What kind of training?"

"Well, shagging, of course. What did you think I meant?"

"Em. Thank you, Tamara... very kind of you, but no. I'm sure you'd be an excellent teacher. But I'd be embarrassed... you being a colleague of sorts, I mean formerly..."

"Oh, George... you're so sweet, but I didn't mean with me, silly. I'm flattered though, you old rogue. I liked that, by the way. That thing with Singleton. He was clearly shaken by it. Something happened in Hong Kong, didn't it? Tell me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like him, and neither do you. And I might be able to use it against him. Why else? It's Amelia, by the way. My name. If I'm ever found dead in a ditch, I'd like someone to know who I really was. And I'd like that to be you, George."

It's hard not to warm to someone, no matter how dangerous, when they say something like that.

Chapter Twenty Five

The immaterial world

In which we return to the Lady Lucy to assist Winona and, in discussing The Secret, we touch upon the Hindu Vedas. We experience a jog of memory, which triggers further intuitive leaps, and the old noggin reveals to me the likely nature of the dreary intrigue surrounding the offices of Battecombe and Bailey. It is indeed a tedious maguffin, which further transforms our tale into a spy story, one concerned with secrets of a lesser nature than that which I am pursuing. The former is concerned only with material, while the latter reveals there is no such thing. Now, do you really want to go on with this? You do? All right. So...

I don't know if they know where the boat is. I'm sure they can work it out, so I just have to trust they mean Winona no harm – I mean they were the ones who involved me in spiriting her away to safety after all, though Clive may have been acting independently in this. Still, I'm aware, of course, on top the threat of cancelling my pension, they might yet use an unspecified or even a concocted threat against her as a lever, if they suspect we've grown close. Perhaps they mistake me for a different kind of man. However, that said, the latter would be more likely to compel an action otherwise against my better judgement – such as indeed attempting to seduce Elaine Dodds, with inevitably disastrous results. Concerning the latter, they obviously have a better opinion of my prowess in the romantic arts, than I do myself.

Were they looking for me? I mean whatever species of human creature who shot the dogs. Did they get the wrong house? Or do I flatter myself I could have become that important, without my knowledge. Still, life is cheap these days... let's just hope Tamara's hunch was wrong. When you hear hooves, George, think horses first, not unicorns. Criminal turf war. And drug peddlers are notoriously violent among their own kind, as well as being careless when it comes to collateral.

Anyway, Winona is pleased to see me, I think. A hug indicates that, wouldn't you say? And she hugs me tight, smells of flowers, and wood smoke from the burner. Clearly, I need to inspect the flue, and check the carbon-monoxide detector is working properly. It takes the bitter taste of the day away, anyway.

"Sorry George. I couldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"The tunnel, you dummy."

"Ah, that..."

The tunnel lies a little way ahead, a portal of apparent doom, a dark orifice, overhung with vegetation. And she's right: it is indeed somewhat vaginal. A boat is coming out of it. Another is going in. There is room for narrow-beamed vessels to pass, unlike some tunnels which only permit one way traffic. They switch directions after a certain time of day. Were they not properly managed, navigation would be impossible of course. You would likely always meet a boat coming the other way, and arguments would ensue. There are some attractive features to anarchy, but I don't see how any organised society can function without rules of navigation, both literal and metaphorical. Anyway, next to entering a lock, the tunnels are my least favourite feature of the canal system. They drip water constantly, and seem a flash-point for the temper tantrums of other boaters.

"Don't worry," I tell her. "We'll do it tomorrow. Or I'll take her through and you can walk over to the other side, if you prefer. It's only a mile or so."

"Thanks, George, but I'll ride with you. Just show me the ropes. I'll be okay, if I've done it the once, with you."

"That's the spirit."

"You can take the day out of my wages."

"Don't be daft. How are you otherwise?"

She brightens. "I'm good. It's been amazing. I love this boat. I'd love to do this for a proper living – you know, moving people's boats around. Well, except for the tunnels. There has to be a market for that, don't you think? "

"You'll get used to the tunnels. That's not a bad idea, actually. You may have stumbled upon a decent business-model there."

"Or fuelling," she says. "I've seen boats going up and down, selling fuel. Diesel, coal, Calor. I talked to the guy, bought some coal off him. They seem to make a living at it. I suppose you'd have to find a stretch of canal that wasn't already served. But I read there are two thousand miles of canal. You'd think there'd be somewhere you could operate."

Actually, it all sounds rather tedious, having to hustle like that. But that's your age talking, George. Winona possesses spark and

energy. Do not extinguish it with your late-season weariness.

It's early evening, now. She has prepared a meal for us, found a white table cloth among the chandlery that came with the boat. There is a little glass jug with a cheerful display of wayside weeds that she has picked. The red poppy takes my eye, moves me deeply for a reason that is yet to be explained. Afterwards I shall keep it, press it in my journal as a memento of this time.

"Are you okay, George. Actually, you look knackered. Did you manage the train all right?"

"Oh... I got a ride with some, em,.. friends. They were passing. I'm all right. So... you're thinking of doing business, on the canals?"

"Don't look at me like that. Even witches have to make a living."

"Is that how you see yourself? A witch?"

"Dunno. How do you see me?"

Good question. How do you see her?

Unearthly, perhaps? Other worldly, certainly. Descended from elves, possibly. She is unique, then... I mean, in that I've never met anyone else – in England, that is – who understood the Tarot as intuitively, and as deeply, and in as intelligent a manner. Perhaps she really is of the elvenkind. She would be wasted aspiring to mere witchery, at least of the disruptive, magikal kind. But I cannot tell her so.

"You are everything I wish I had been, when I was your age, Winona."

I'm sorry it came out like that. Do you know what Namaste means? I mean in respect to the Vedas? It means I recognise, respect, and pay tribute to the divinity in you. So...

Namaste, Winona.

I think she knows what I mean. And that is why I love her.

"And how is that, George?"

"I mean you are unafraid to engage, and to trust in your imaginative faculties."

"Oh?"

"I tell myself I know what The Secret is. I can explain it, philosophically. I can even prove it with reference to material that is culturally suppressed. But I don't believe in it. I discovered it too late, I think, and might never believe in it, now. I have spent too long vacillating between the rational and the intuitive. But you? You have time enough yet, to *believe* in it."

"Who's to say I don't?"

"Well, do you?"

She looks away. Too much, George, too intense. This is why girls have never taken to you. But that's also because they never quite understood what it was you wanted from them. And what was that? What did you want?

Why divinity, of course.

She looks back, a spark of defiance now. That's my girl! I think she knows, which makes her very dangerous to me. Come on. Spit in my eye.

"No," she says. "I don't believe in it *all the time*. Sometimes I do. I have to, or it wouldn't work, would it? The magic, I mean. The cards, too. And I mean, it works. Sometimes. Sounds weak, I know, but I don't care, right? I have to put myself in that frame of mind, you know? Other times, all right, no... I don't believe. I can't. How can I? From the way we're taught, as infants, it's absurd. Right? And then it doesn't work."

"Indeed. But there is also a danger in seeking such belief. I have imagined the way to it is through contemplation, and by unplugging oneself from the material world, one hang-up at a time. And slowly, I've become un-moored. I'm not a magician. I am a mystic. I drift through the world now, touching nothing, and nobody. No thought, no idea lingers for very long. And certainly I have no convictions. So, if it's true, and we are each of us the universe becoming aware of itself, I must present a very dreary vision of things. I see no fireworks of wonder. And I regret that. I've been too long seeking the master, instead of showing him what a joy it is to be alive."

"Perhaps that's where we need to look, then, George. Find the joy of living, and belief will follow."

Curious. I saw a flash of something, then. Or rather I felt it, as if for a moment she was indeed channelling divinity.

You see how dangerous such thoughts can be?

"Hard to be joyful in the midst of so much suffering, though, Winona. I don't mean my own suffering. I've done very well, materially. But others are suffering. You are suffering. And as the climate changes, becomes violent, things will inevitably get worse with smaller and smaller habitable areas being colonised and fought over. And the poor, who are already living there, will be pushed out to the oppressed margins. I once did a report on that, actually. Funny, I'd forgotten..."

Ah, yes, but you wrote so much over the years, George, didn't you? You passed it all up the chain of command, and without so much as a word coming back to you, and anyway you were always onto the next thing. Briefings, studies, more reports...

Northern England fares surprisingly well, actually. Strange, that. The South less so, with rising sea levels and desertification, invasive and toxic species of flora and fauna. In the North there will be wetter winters, certainly. The summers will be warmer, and more humid. Spring months will be increasingly dry, with moderate droughts – but which could be mitigated by improved water storage and cautious irrigation. Valleys to be flooded in Cumbria, Yorkshire, Derbyshire. Terribly secret of course, since these are still popular tourist destinations.

Food security? An issue. Civil unrest? An issue – hence the water cannon, perhaps? Housing? An issue. As for land ownership, the smart money will be moving in already, tracing ownership, buying up the leases. Expect also actors operating on behalf of hostile foreign nations, on behalf of organised criminals, on behalf of crooked domestic politicians... blah-di-blah-di-blah. An estimate of the value of Russian money still sequestered deep in portfolios of English property, and land, in spite of recent hostilities that sought their divestment.

Actions recommended: surveillance of the Land Registry: sales, transfers of land, and property in aforementioned critical regions. Forensic analysis of holding companies, chains of ownership. Use of the machinery of domestic construction entities to secure strategic land parcels on behalf of HMG.

The Domestic Security Review, it was called, the DSR. *Nothing to worry about, chaps, but your worst case scenarios please*. Heavens, I remember it, now! It was a monumental work. I supplied the annexe, and was rather proud of it: "Climate change – threats and mitigation," as I recall. An interesting study. It was struck out of the final draft, for fear of offending ministers already convinced by fossil fuel lobbyists climate change was a hoax. We're talking some years ago, when things did not seem so urgent as they do now, though the scientific markers were very well established.

Is that it, then, George? Is that the thing you once worked on that so interests the service now, or rather your annexe to it, and which proved so politically embarrassing at the time?

Don't be a fool, any switched-on graduate with an IQ above middling

could reassemble what you came up with, and more...

So Tamara was hinting.

She was giving you the background, without actually *giving* it to you, and just relying on the penny to drop. Those houses will never be built. Or if they are, they will not be for poor people. The game is to buy up and control the land as a strategic asset. Heavens, what a wheeze...

But wait!

Do you see what happened there? One moment, Winona and I were discussing metaphysical matters. We were fumbling in the dark for that door whose opening would reveal the joy of living, the meaning of being, and which would trigger a certainty of belief. Then the ego intervened and presented instead its intrigue, its conspiracy. And then we were thinking about land, and fossil fuels, and sinister actors bestride the world's stage.

We were inventing a spy story!

Always, something guides us back into the petty vexations of the material world, do you see? It's like a voracious creature dwelling inside of us, addicted to wallowing in its own mess. But need it always be that way? All right, the point of Brahman is not to remember itself, but to experience itself. Seven point seven billion ways to be and to see, you see? That's a bewildering perspective...

Brahman? For those unfamiliar with comparative spirituality, I'll explain in a moment. If I'm boring you please skip to the next chapter, or set the story aside altogether.

Quick, George! A hook to hold the reader...

Winona's hand reaches across and rests lightly on the back of mine. "George... are you all right?"

"Hmm?"

"You sort of tuned out."

"I did? Yes... sorry. I was just thinking... oh, lots of things."

"Sounds like you need an early night."

"Yes. You're right. I should sleep. And we should start early tomorrow. The more aggressive element will be jockeying for position from mid morning. It's better to proceed sedately, and that's difficult when one has a speeding nut-job, nudging one from behind."

"Thanks for the encouragement."

"We'll be fine, Winona."

I don't know if we'll be fine or not. People panic in the dark.

They feign bravado when they are confused and scared. Another thought comes to me:

"We are seven point seven billion beings on planet earth. To say nothing of countless other sentient creatures in the universe, the little green men and so forth. We should include them too, of course, or at least the theoretical possibility of them."

"In what?"

"The eyes and ears of the Universe. The Universe becoming aware of itself. But imagine trying to make sense of that. The disharmony, I mean. The cruelty. And just the occasional small pockets of kindness."

"Are you like this with all the girls?"

"Ah... sadly no. I usually reign myself in. But I feel I can be more myself with you, and either you won't mind, or you'll pretend not to."

She sits back, toys with the notion for a while, then sweeps back her hair to reveal her elven ears. It's always a shock when I see them, a moment in which the breath is held.

"Who's to say the way things are here, are the right way they should turn out, George? In the universe, I mean. As for your little green men, ask me, they can't be like us or they'd be a hair's breadth from extinction, same as us. And maybe that's why it's so quiet out there, why the sky at night's so dark, so void of life. No space-ships, nothing. Because to build tech like that, you've got to have dealt with your anger issues first, don't you think? Otherwise you'd just blow yourself up.

"What I'm saying is there's no saying we'll survive. And maybe that's the natural way, and maybe we're not meant to. And the universe will be wondering why, and then it'll examine every thought that was ever thunk here on planet earth, and all those other places that failed to make it through their nuclear bomb, and their fossil fuel stages. And it'll know not all ways of thinking are equal. It'll know some ways will take you forward, and some will take you back. And isn't that the evolutionary thing too? Survival of the most well adapted ways of thinking..."

"True, Winona. But if the universe as it is in itself is timeless, then it knows this already. Indeed, we are already extinct, so why labour it?"

"All right, then what if...." She trails off. She'd been doing so well, but now loses confidence, or becomes self conscious.

"Go on..."

"What if it's only those who reach a certain level of thinking who get to level up? What if there's another level after this one, and another after that? I mean might there be ways of being where you can make things happen just by thinking about them. You'd have to be very careful in your thinking before you could be let loose in a place like that. Is *that* a possibility, do you think?"

"Ah... *that*. You know, Frederick Myers, late nineteenth century classicist, and experimental psychologist, described such things, from beyond the grave, apparently, dictated to one Geraldine Cummins. Nonsense, you might say, until you read it, and then it has a certain ring of authenticity. The Road to Immortality... that's the one. Spirit mediums make similar claims about the afterlife, though the innocent should always be careful where they're concerned. Myers is an interesting case, though. I'd say his legacy continued well into the last century, before we were largely taught to dismiss it, to seek the meaning of our lives in other ways."

"What, like in consumer goods and things?"

"Quite. That would be Freud – or rather his nephew-in-law, Ed Bernays. I think at this point it was when we crystallised the rather chilling philosophy that it was no longer sufficient, the fact we existed. We had to justify our existence by our labours, and measure our worth in purely material terms. Now the world lacks meaning, and we all are dying for the lack of it, and academia scratches its head as if the problem is a hard one. But it's hard only in respect of how we reconcile the material and the spiritual worlds – though I prefer the word psychical to spiritual. How do we explain your magic from a material perspective, Winona? Alas we cannot, except to dismiss it, when it works, as a mere coincidence."

"So you think you have the answer? The Secret?"

"Well, yes. And I suppose we can sum it up by saying things fit together so much better, if we assume there is no material."

Chapter Twenty Six

The clear light of day

In which Winona, and I negotiate the tunnel, discover the light of day on the other side, and in which I try to persuade you to believe she really can cast a spell. Good luck with that, you're thinking. She writes me a poem and we discuss romance. So...

It does not detract from the beauty of the world. I mean, this lack of any material substance to it. Neither is it to say the world is not as solid as it feels. It obeys the equations of solidity, of dimension, and time. But since these equations come out of the same mind we do, the illusion is complete. Like in the dreaming, we have no choice but to believe in its circumscribed reality. So, yes, it is still beautiful. We do not delude ourselves in that, though it has to be said, many see only ugliness, a fact which perhaps points the way to other things. I'm not telling you this is the way it is – I mean, who knows for sure? I'm only saying that it's the way I see it. Many non-material visions of the universe do not stand up to philosophical attack, but mine does, and I have spent a long time attacking it from many angles.

It's a little after six in the morning, now, dawn's first light. I have opened the hatch, and emerged onto the after deck. The world is silent, ethereal, holy. The canal and the meadows either side of us are covered in a creamy mist, with sprites dancing over the water. I find coffee always tastes better at this hour.

I have dreamed things I wish I had not dreamed. Or rather, since I am of the school that says dreams inform us, in hidden ways, of the things we need to know, I rather wish I did not need to know these particular things right now. Or again, rather I wish I could understand the metaphors, and the allegory a little better instead of being disturbed by the more literal interpretations to which the analytic mind is always prone.

There is a growing intimacy between Winona and me. That much is impossible to ignore. I have met very few who would be even remotely interested in exploring what we talked of last night, and certainly a part of me is wishing I was thirty years younger. But then I would only waste the opportunity in conventional desire, as one usually does when one mistakes one’s soul, one’s Anima for the unfortunate human female one has projected it upon.

It was she who closed the hatch, drew the bolt, sealed us in, so to speak, and there had been a certain look in her eye when she had done it. It was an intimate thing, confining us to this narrow space for the night, to sleep, and to dream. And it is impossible to lie in one's bunk, even as sleep calls, and not be aware of her presence in the forward cabin, if only because I must resist the more relaxed way I normally deal with flatulence. I must peel back one cheek and let it out silently. It would be ungentlemanly to do otherwise. A properly satisfying fart would travel the length of the boat several time over.

We did not make love in the dream – nothing like that. It was much more intimate. There was a circular room, carved from the hollow of a tree, our tree, perhaps – the fallen one, I mean. But in the dream, the stump of it was much bigger, and taller, like one of those stupendous American redwoods. We sealed the windows when darkness fell, like I seal the portholes of my little cabin, by pressing a circular cushion into them. The room was lit by a crystal sphere that Winona had brought to life by placing her hands upon it and willing her spirit into it. The glow of the crystal was thus the glow of her being, which is warm and red. It had me longing to be with her, not carnally, but in that deep, deep way we long to be with our pre-pubescent loves. I can understand how mature men have inappropriate feelings for college girls. They are remembering something of themselves, as they were at their first awakening. But in later life, they mistake it for desire, the more self-conscious are embarrassed by it, while the less conscious will seek to behave improperly.

I still feel the stirrings of the dream, as I sip my coffee. It haunts me, and I wonder. Do I lack a daughter, perhaps? Would it be a positive step to open myself to the possibility of it? Or would it be more retrograde. Much depends, of course, on Winona.

She appears in the hatchway. "Mornin' Cap'n."

Her irreverence is always refreshing, puts my head back on an even keel, so to speak.

"Ah... good morning. But, remember, you're the captain. I am merely the vessel's owner."

"Well, whatever. Sorry about last night."

"Last night?"

"All that rubbish I talked."

"I seem to remember talking more rubbish than you."

"Yes, well... like we were drunk or something."

"Rubbish? You think so?"

"Seems like rubbish in the cold light of day, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly. But then our days are for living, while our nights are for dreaming."

She looks shy of a sudden, hands me a piece of paper, then disappears below. "Wrote you a poem," she calls back, as if embarrassed to tell me to my face.

Unplugging all connections,
Unfastening the snares,
Might we not embrace a cleaner air,
And fall?
See how tight we cling
To things
Of no consequence,
Our fingers jammed in every crack,
Our arms, tired and aching,
Legs, fearful, shaking.
Let it go, let it all go,
And backwards fall, and trust,
No dash of rocks, no rush
Of earth to black.
There is only this endless void, and true,
In which we might begin,
To embrace the world anew,
Then open up our Eye,
And let the clearer light, of day,
Come flooding in.

Ah, now let me see: Open up our Eye?

Capital "E", do you see that? She means the eye of imagination – the third eye, the eye through which visions come to us. Let go? Trust in the universe to catch you. Yes, I should be doing that more often at my age. But this is a poem for the second half of life, and Winona is a little young to be thinking that way. She should be partnering up, and making babies, making homes for them to grow in, securing the way for the generation that follows, before she goes writing poems like that. But what will those future generations do? Will they not simply make the mistakes of all the generations gone by, born in ignorance and a long time learning the ropes, until darkness takes them? Why do we assume the future is the business

of the next generation. Why not us? Ours. Here. Now. Make a difference now!

And let the clearer light, of day, come flooding in.

Or perhaps some of us are simply born old. I am moved by the poem. How can you not love someone who writes you a poem?

Anyway, to the task in hand:

Contrary to my expectations, there is an early scramble for the tunnel, a sudden cacophony of diesel putterings, and the wash of several wakes to disturb the mirror calm of morning. They rock the Lady Lucy against her mooring. We let it subside somewhat, then Winona screws down her misgivings, takes the tiller and I make busy with the lines. I catch her eye, she nods, gives revs, and I nudge the bows out with the pole. Winona picks up the steerage and we head for the hole.

"Well, fuck me," she says. "Here we go."

I dislike hearing girls swear, just as I dislike them being tattooed, but that's just my generation, and you girls must forgive me. I'm sure my father must have said the "f" word more than once in his life, but he never did so in my presence, allowing me at least the illusion of a once-upon-a-time without such staccato profanity. My mother did once say it, I recall. "Oh, fuck," she said. "I need to pee." But she was hours from death, and addled by one last merciful shot of diamorphine. And I was more shocked that she said the world pee, than fuck.

And girls should swear, if they want to.

As we gather speed, I note a peculiar craft coming up astern, moving rather faster than it should. It is not your common or garden variety, gaily painted house-boat, like the Lady Lucy. It has the shape of such, but is decked out stem to stern in matt black, like a parody of a special ops, super-stealth vehicle. Perhaps it even carries torpedoes. I suspect a psychopath at the tiller. It is too late to let them pass, so they fall in behind and I anticipate trouble.

Winona braves the tunnel. I see the fear in her eyes, as she takes in the dark, and the dripping brickwork. Steerage is awkward, confused by the darkness. Our super-bright lamp lights the way but the shadows are cast strangely and we imagine the side of the tunnel is sucking us adrift. It takes a while to adapt, but Winona gains a feel for it. We make way, steadily, gathering confidence as we go, while the stealth boat closes down the gap of clear water between us.

"Not so bad as I thought," she says, smiling now.

But we are not fast enough for the stealth boat, which rather unstealthily, and unsubtly, comes up behind, and gives us a nudge.

Winona is caught by surprise, and nearly overbalances. "What the?"

I catch her arm to steady her. "An impatient mariner, astern."

"Are they allowed to do that?"

"Ram a fellow bargee? I'm sure it's not in the official book of the way. And by any standard it is rather impolite. But then so in darkness does many a sin go unpunished."

"What do we do?"

"Well, we could speed up, which is what he wants, but I recommend we don't. We could slow down to the minimum required to maintain steerage, which I'm tempted to suggest... however... as a rule when urged by others to crack on for no good reason, the best policy is to maintain course and speed."

"Are you always this magnanimous when dealing with a fucking idiot?"

"Habit, I'm afraid, yes. Whenever I encounter a person who is clearly lacking all self awareness, as you say, I tend to fall back on professional curiosity and detachment."

We peer aft, into the darkness, but it's a long vessel and we cannot see the figure at the tiller. Also, its lamp, mounted over the well deck, is uncomfortably bright. The person is shouting an echoing profanity.

"Well, you fall back on whatever you like. But I'm captain of this vessel, you said."

"Indeed you are."

"Right then."

She cuts the throttle, turns to face our oppressor, who rams us again, though this time, I suspect, accidentally, not having expected us to cut speed even further. I'm wondering what she is intending – a boarding operation, perhaps? But no, she merely gestures. It's a wave of the hand, palm outwards as one would dismiss an annoyance, or press someone, or something aside. The stealth barge falls quiet, and the distance from its bows to our stern opens wide of a sudden.

She looks at me, guilty, sheepish, I don't know, but there's also an emptiness to her, like she threw every ounce of her anger at the offending boat, and it has exhausted her.

"Sorry, George, can you take over. I need to lie down, now."

She relinquishes the tiller, embraces me in passing. I catch hold of her, tight, enquiring. "What did you do?"

Except, I don't speak it. I try to communicate it through my brief hold on her. She feels my query, I know, but she does not reply. She did something, but cannot explain it. This is not my first brush with the power of witch-craftery, but it is my first brush with it in the West. Or not, as the case may be, the case being that which is determined by the extent of your ignorance, or your credulity – take your pick – but don't expect me to explain it any further than that. You're either in or you're out.

I nudge the throttle up a notch or two, pick up steerage, and thread the Lady Lucy through this dripping dungeon, to the revelation of daylight on the other side. Distance opens, and I slow, waiting for the bastard craft to appear, but it seems something has snagged its prop. You think witchcraft is something practised by silly little girls? Well, that's your choice. And yes, one would prefer to explain the incident away as a coincidence. Myself? I don't know, but would prefer not to mess with it.

We are moored some miles away from the tunnel now, and I am frying bacon, when Winona reappears, tempted out of her lair by the scent. "I have a temper, George. I'm sorry."

"Then remind me never to get on your bad side."

"Have they come through yet?"

"No."

"It’s been hours. Do you think they're all right?"

"You want to go back and see?"

"Perhaps we'd better. I've not thrown one like that for a long time."

Thrown one. It's a casual way of putting it. A thunderbolt of psychokinesis, or a convenient self deception followed by an obliging coincidence. The offending vessel was going to snag its prop anyway. The timing was merely fortunate, and Winona is both deluded and neurotic, which is what you have to conclude if you are rational, and do not know her. So go head.

"Well, I suggest we brew tea first, and enjoy our bacon butties. Let's give them the afternoon and see what happens. They might have been towed out from behind, perhaps, much to the annoyance of everyone else trying to get through."

Our assailants appear several hours later, and cruise by without

doing us the courtesy of recognising us. We sit astern and watch. The man and the woman, both pleasant looking sorts, even give us a cheery wave. But then we are in the broad light of day now. People are strange. Darkness, as well as for dreaming, brings out the devils in us.

Winona sighs, smiles. "Weird day. Weird times. Tell me, George, do you have a girlfriend?"

"Eh?" Where did that one come from? "No."

"Want me to fix you up?"

"Em... well, that's very kind of you. But I'm all right, thank you."

"Never had one?"

"Not really anything long term. I've led a peculiar kind of life, you see? It was never conducive to genuine relationship."

"You mean being a spy."

"Really, you make too much of that. I just travelled a lot."

"Not doing that now, though. Don't you want to be with someone?"

"Well... no. I find as one ages, a man's muse becomes increasingly more manifest and powerful in his psyche, rather than being projected out into the world."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning... one is no longer as enamoured of the romantic, Winona."

"No longer as *enamoured*, George? Or is it more that you are simply not expecting it?"

Chapter Twenty Seven

All and Everything

In which we consider the least likely of outcomes, and which of those you might prefer to believe in. We speak again with Elaine, consider how we might go about her seduction. Or should we simply tell her the whole story, for the sheer hell of it? Either way, we run the risk of finding ourselves entrapped. So...

One is no longer as enamoured of the romantic. Is that really what I said? All right, I *know* I said it, but do I mean it? Let's just park it for a moment. Let me come back to you on that one. Instead, let me ask you this: you're thinking it's a bit of a stretch, aren't you? I mean what I'm expecting you to believe, that Winona could stop a boat in its tracks, or rather in its wake, or something, simply by... what? By intention? By spell-craft? More, you're thinking it's even a little unfair of me, having brought you this far, to suggest you now take seriously the possibility her abilities are real? Well, in my defence, I should say my aim is more to have you examine your thinking. So, let's say you are thinking it cannot be true.

But why can it not?

Because it goes against everything you have been taught to hold as real.

Well, of course it has.

But again, I do not ask you to believe it, only that you examine your thoughts on the matter.

I made it up, you think!

Well, this is a story, after all, and though I am doing my best, I am not the most reliable of narrators. Indeed there might be many things I have made up, but you have less trouble permitting yourself to believe in. Which are they, I wonder. Examine your thoughts and thereby map out the territory of your prejudice. Consider also: there may be many things I am keeping from you.

Absurd, you say.

Well, if we can revisit the Zen masters for moment:

"Does a dog have Buddha nature?"

"Woof, woof."

Yes, the answer is absurd, but then from a certain perspective, so is the question. Let me just plant that seed in you. And let's also say it was a coincidence, Winona stopping the boat with a volley of

well aimed intention. So, now we return to the earlier question, that is Winona's question:

Do I really not desire romance? Or am I merely no longer expecting it?

You see? You are interested in romance. Thus, we land on safer ground already.

So let me consider: When an adult contemplates romance, is there not also the implicit suggestion of a sexual relationship as its climax? Well, truly, I have no need of such a thing these days. I am no James Bond, who, even in advanced old age still feels the peculiar need to impregnate women, whether they are up for it, or might yet be persuaded by the cut of his Tuxedo, and his phallic super-car.

I don't know exactly where along the way I lost my Mojo, as they say, for it was once a most pleasurable thing to have. I know it was some time before my brains were irradiated, so I cannot blame that particular incident, I mean that my balls were fried at the same time. But neither do I lament it. It was an emotional, possibly even a spiritual development. Something lost, but something also found.

Do you mind if I speak of spiritual matters?

Then again, have I not been speaking of spiritual matters all along.? It's just that I am constantly interrupted by the profane.

But back to romances.

How can one contemplate romance, seduction even, if one is no longer enamoured of the sexual act? I suppose the befrienders who have propositioned me down the ages were perfectly capable, while not exactly relishing the prospect with a mere intelligence target. I am thinking of them now, as I sit out on the deck with Elaine. I am thinking also we would make an elegant couple, most certainly, should we be so inclined to show it off, which I suspect neither of us are. What use then, if we do not connect with each other at a level deep enough to become addicted to one another? Do we connect at all? Is it just a question of time? Or do I simply find her too cold, too distant, too enamoured of the mother?

As to practical matters, scene setting and all that, I have supplied the wine, and Elaine has conjured up a selection of cheeses. This was at her invitation, as we climbed the stairs together to our rooms, earlier, she fresh from the office, and perfume scented, me fresh from my travels and smelling of the canal. It's growing cooler of an evening now, and the nights are

drawing in, the sunsets coming earlier, though more beautiful in their contrasts. I wear a jacket, she a wrap. It is still pleasant to sit out, and she is easy company. Perhaps all that is left for me to consider here is what a woman of such age and experience expects of any man.

"You've been away again, George?"

"Yes. Bringing the boat a little further north."

"I've had some time away, too. Mother's getting worse. In her mind, that is. Her constitution is robust enough. She'll probably outlive me, then resent me for being so uncaring as to leave her to die alone."

Ah, the mother already. Her intrusion never takes long. I would like to meet the mother, if only to satisfy my curiosity. She would hate me of course, unless I proved compliant enough to also be enslaved by her emotional machinations. I would like her to try, then I can take pleasure in being rude to her. Though I would in all likelihood not – be rude I mean – not wishing to hurt Elaine's feelings, and thereby entrap myself by proxy.

"It must be very vexing for you, Elaine."

"If I could hear her say thank you, just once, it would be a revelation."

"I rather doubt it."

"Which?"

"Both. I mean that she will ever say it, and that it would be as satisfying for you to hear it as you would hope."

She nods. I cannot offend her in this, which is either a good, or a bad sign, depending on the desired direction of our relationship, which, as you know, confuses me. Anyway, she is thoroughly secure in her imprisonment, and, as I have said before, quite beyond rescue. It would be a foolish man who tried, therefore, to lower her a rope, and did not expect to be disappointed by his efforts. We really have no future together, yet I am under threat – possibly imagined – if I do not at least try.

There is another way, of course – not wise, but more noble, I'm thinking.

"And what would satisfy me, do you think?" she asks.

"Oh, I don't know. We must enjoy our pleasures as they arise. This cheese for example. The wine is a bit of a let-down, though. My apologies. It was the best they could manage at the Grindleton stores. Though having said that, they don't keep an altogether bad

cellar."

"Have you thought any more... I mean, about us going away together?"

Ah! So she has decided not to swerve that one, and indeed now seems to be pushing for it. Interesting, George.

"I have indeed, Elaine. I've thought about it at some length, mainly on account of certain events which have overtaken me, well both of us, actually."

She tries not to sound disappointed. "You've changed your mind?... it's quite all right... really..."

How polite she is? How delicately she brushes off the dust of disappointment. She may be oppressed, but she has character, still. She has... aspiration! There is consciousness, a beating heart. There is a soul for ever wriggling out from underneath her mother's shoe!

"On the contrary, no. I would like it very much. However... these events. Tell me, Elaine... have you your phone on you?"

"It's up in my room. Why? Please, go on... events, you said."

"Well, it's rather indiscrete of me to say, but since we last spoke, I've been approached by former colleagues who find your position at the firm of Battecombe and Bailey an interesting one. They feel you are uniquely positioned to provide them with... well... let's say... information."

You see how easy it is to betray one's country, for friendship? This will blow back on me at some point, I'm sure. Indeed I cannot imagine lying to Tamara. She would see through me at once. But that's for tomorrow, or the next day.

"Oh? What kind of information?"

"Well... everything they can get their hands on, I should imagine. And then some. Indeed an endless list, and always more. Clients, accounts... associates..."

"I don't understand, George. I take it these are government friends of yours? And they're asking me to... what? Spy for them?" She doesn't seem unduly horrified, which surprises me. Indeed, I half suspect she finds it exciting. And that she finds it exciting, I find alarming. Let's tell her the funny part then:

"It's absurd, I know. They suggest I am also perfectly placed to seduce you into sharing this information."

She laughs, but not unkindly. "Are they mad?"

"Oh, not mad, but... you know? Let's say they inhabit a different universe to the rest of us. They have an objective and will

brainstorm any means to achieve it. Perhaps this particular idea is one of the few that remained on the board after their discussions. There are probably other options they're pursuing, and seeing which of them sticks."

"Why didn't they just approach me?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, they just have."

"Ah. Of course. Silly of me. But... George, how exciting!"

I was right. This is a woman short of stimulation.

"Not really, Elaine. It's rather serious, and tedious at the same time. Possibly dangerous too. And puts us both in a bit of a bind."

"But... what shall we do?"

"Well, the safest course is that you must resist my advances. You must cold-shoulder me. Perhaps when you are next speaking to your mother on the phone, you could tell her you have just met this perfectly obnoxious man, and you wish he would leave you alone. They'll be listening to your phone, and will know by that the game is lost."

"How wonderfully devious! But, what if I don't want to cold-shoulder you?"

"Well, as flattering as I find that, can I suggest you pretend? And then leave the firm as you planned. Hopefully that'll be and end to it. Time has a habit of fudging things. And we can pick up our friendship after that, I mean in the safety of a future time, should you wish."

"Or not, seeing as how I'll be hundreds of miles away by then. And I would like to enjoy a little friendship before then. So, I have a better idea. Why don't we play along?"

"Oh, now... I don't think that's a good idea at all. One doesn't play with people like this. They basically find a way to own you, and then they ruin your life, piece by piece. I know. I've had a unique opportunity over the years to watch as they go about their business. It's best to avoid them. If time is of the essence, as it seems to be, they'll find another way."

She produces a golden memory stick, shaped like a key. It's hanging on a silken cord around her neck, and she hauls it up, so to speak, from the fragrantly humid deeps of her bosom, and hands it over. It's scalding hot in my palm, hot from her body, indeed from the soft embrace of her breasts. It gives me quite the adolescent shiver, something half remembered, I mean, that Elaine is flesh and blood. And that she has breasts.

Heavens!

I have to ask: "And this is?"

"Everything you've just asked for. Files, new and old, the entire archive, and works in progress, both my own and everyone else's, as of close of business this evening. See what a good spy you are, George?"

And she just happens to have it all around her neck? "Em.... there must be an awful lot of very personal information on there."

"Indeed there is, and it's shameful to be carrying it around. But I'm often contacted of an evening, the boss wanting things done by morning. There's no other way to do that, except to have a copy of everything to hand at all times, night and day. Other firms employ secure servers one could simply log into remotely. For some reason Battecombe and Bailey do it this way. It prevents us from being hacked, I suppose. It's truly shocking what you can fit on one of those things. It's one of the reasons I'm leaving, actually. They're somewhat eccentric in the data protection department, as you can see. And some of the clients are... well, let's say they're less than upstanding."

"It's password protected?"

"Of course. You can keep that one. I have another."

"I don't know what to say."

McGuffin. That's what *you* should say, yet see how you latch onto it, all the same? You overlook the fact of how easily she gives it up, but it's so much easier to believe in, I wager, than Winona's magic. Is it that we are more readily persuaded by the tangible nature of material objects, no matter how absurd, than by ideas, no matter how intriguing? Yet, for me, of the two, I'd say that Elaine chanced to have this thing around her neck, is the less convincing of recent developments. Still, stranger things have happened. And will no doubt continue to do so.

I set it on the table and slide it back to her. "I can't take this," I tell her. "And neither can you."

"Neither can I what?"

"Betray your employer. Think about it. I might not be who you think I am. I could be in the employ of a rival firm, merely looking for a commercial advantage."

It strikes me the tables are turned. I have become a befriender. But not a very good one.

"Well, are you, George?"

"No. But whatever I say, you can't take my word for it."

"But what if I choose to? We all have to believe in somebody, and I choose to believe in you. Living in a world of lies can be most disorientating. It does one good to allow oneself to believe wholeheartedly in at least one thing, or one person."

"But it's not always wise..."

"You're forgetting, I know you. I'm reading people all the time, remember? Rationally, no, none of us should trust another, ever. But where does that leave us? Thanks heavens then for our instincts. And my instincts regarding you are entirely positive. And anyway, given some of the antics of my employers, it would tar me with the same brush if I were not to give up their secrets, when asked by the authorities, I mean for my country... and all that... I presume."

"Oh, Elaine... there is no country, other than the earth beneath our feet. The rest is invention, and there we must be careful. I mean... which version of that particular chimera we allow ourselves to believe in."

She thinks about this for a moment, does not entirely disagree, but then comes back: "Well, there is the law. I believe in the law. Don't you? It is at least a useful starting point."

"Only in so far as we accept the law is an invention of the wealthy for protection against the poor. As for the poor, it is what chains them. No disrespect to your profession, Elaine. Indeed my own performs a similar function."

I note she does not disagree with this point either.

"But, George. I don't understand. Back up a little. Why are you telling me any of this?"

A good point, George. Why are you telling her?

"Well, I think... I want you to know there are dark forces gathering around your employer, though from what you say, you already know this. In which case, think of it also as a timely warning that you should be careful of getting sucked in too deeply, either by Messrs Battecombe and Bailey, or by the people who used to employ me."

"Or by you?"

"Or indeed by me."

"But you could simply have cold shouldered me, as you put it, and there would be an end to it."

"Yes... yes, I could have done that. But I am fond of you Elaine.

And your predicament worries me. I think I am more use to you as a friend, someone you can call upon, rather than have you consider me an enemy. Also, were it not to be me, I'm sure they would only send someone else."

"So you *do* want me to trust you. And I do. So, really, I think the safest thing to do is to give your people what they want. And what they want is on that thing. And probably much more besides. I'll let you be the judge of what to pass on. And then you can pretend to seduce me in exchange for it, or not, if that's what you prefer, but I recommend we at least keep up some sort of pretence, when in earshot of our telephones, or at any rate when there is a possibility we might otherwise be observed."

I have the feeling of being manoeuvred into a corner. Indeed, Elaine is quite adept as a manipulator. Perhaps she learned it from her mother. It's true, it would be useful to have something to report, next time Tamara pops up, but Elaine is wrong in thinking we will ever be done with it.

"All right. It's a secure password, I hope?"

"Yes. I'll let you have it after dinner, on our first night, in that nice hotel you promised me."

Chapter Twenty Eight

A Different Measure

In which there is a change of pebble eyed men next door, and the interest in my father's house rises to the point I am made an offer I'm not sure I dare refuse. We try to avoid Elaine while we gather our thoughts, and we see The Secret receding far into the distance as matters profane mount, legion upon legion, and we begin to stumble over them with ever increasing frequency. We seek the counsel of the wise old man, but he is not for talking, so seek instead respite with Winona, on the boat. So...

"Hey, what's up?"

I am pulling weed from the front borders of my father's house, when of a sudden there's this man looking at me from over the fence. It is a shaven-headed, pebble-eyed man, but not the one I know. Is he of the same clan, though, I wonder? Or a rival clan, perhaps? Or is he of the police-man clan?

And his question: What's up? Is this is merely the You-tube greeting? Then it is not a question at all, but merely an opening for me to step into. Be careful where you put your feet then, George.

"Hello there."

"You live here?"

Honesty, George. No guile. No guardedness. Let him have no excuse for thinking you disrespect him.

"Not any more. I grew up here. It was my father's house. He died recently. I just drop by now and then to keep it tidy, while I decide what to do with it."

"Is nice place. You are looking to sell, maybe?"

"Yes, I think so. I... suppose so."

"When you suppose you sell?"

"As soon as I can get around to it."

"Oh yes? I think it will be a good idea for you to get around to it quick."

Strongly accented English. Perhaps he does not mean to sound menacing. He is merely blunt in his approach, and his limited vocabulary renders his tone somewhat terse. He hands me a note with a mobile telephone number on it. "You have solicitor? Give this number. You name price. I pay top dollar, no question. Cash. But don't take piss, okay? This will be acceptable to you?"

How would my father have dealt with such people? Would he

even have known what he was dealing with? Would Mr Williams, and his Voigtländer, and his trilby hat have been recognised by them as the gentle sage he was? Or would they have merely tried to sell him drugs?

In the 60's, when this house, and my father, and Mr Williams had their heyday-youths, the gangsmen confined themselves to specific city warrens, where I suppose the action was at its most lucrative. Now they spill out, along the extended supply lines, the county lines, and are everywhere. Indeed, they are international. It was partly my duty to protect you all from that. We failed, and now you are largely defenceless against it. I apologise. It's weak, I know. But there we are. How do any of us deal with it? Well, as one would any dangerous animal, I suppose: quietly, and with circumspection.

I had better have the house cleared. It breaks my heart, but it's time to let it go. There is no resisting a tide like this. Where shall I build my moated castle, now, I wonder? Where there is no money, I suppose. Where there are no people, nor mineral resources, nor anything that is wanted by someone else. Any ideas?

What is the point of a life, if we must spend all our lives avoiding the business of living? Is it merely to mind your self, and never mind the rest? I suppose it is, if one is to accept The Secret beyond all secrets, if one is to *believe* in it. So, mind yourself, George.

"Yes. That sounds acceptable. Mr?..."

"Piotr. Get solicitor call number, ask for Piotr."

"Very well, Piotr. Would you not like to look around inside?"

"No. I don't care for this. Good day to you, sir."

"And a good day to you, Piotr."

I do not ask what became of the other guy. It doesn't matter. There is a long line of them, all from the same troubling seed. Maybe I should have taken up Tamara's offer of a firearm? Don't be stupid, George. You got lucky that one time. There's no saying you would be so lucky again.

We'd better take stock, then. What is there that is still of value here? My father valued mostly his garden, but that is lost to the future anyway, to gravel and concrete, no matter how tidy we keep it, no matter how prettily it speaks of past values, of past aspirations to a sweeter meaning, and in stark contrast to the nihilism of present times. His papers are already cross-shredded and burned. I have taken his watch, my grandfather's watch, his and my

mother's wedding rings, their parent's rings, and all the other pieces of gold trinketry, had them melted, and crafted into the torc I wear with my wristwatch. It seemed an efficient solution to the symbolic gathering, and the honouring of my ancestry. The only other thing I could think of was the Rabone Chesterman six inch rule my father used as a toolmaker throughout his working life, and to which, even in retirement, he seemed eccentrically attached. I keep it on the boat, mounted on a small plaque, in the galley, symbolic of the way his generation used to measure the world differently.

The rest can go, son.
All right, Dad.
Let it go, let it all go,
And backwards fall, and trust,
No dash of rocks, no rush
Of earth to black...

I venture then into Middleton, in search of coffee, and a carousel of people to watch, no matter how dishevelled they might be. I find it soothing. But dishevelled or not, there is none, I mean, neither carousel, nor coffee. The usual place has closed down, is empty of its chairs and tables now, not that I would have gone in there anyway. Indeed, in a childish way, I hope it is the absence of Winona that has caused the collapse of the business, that the business saw only bums on seats, and cared nothing for the charm with which they were served. Let that be a lesson, damn you. In spite of all evidence to the contrary, human beings, *individual beings*, are important!

I see some of the empty shops are being re-purposed as bookies, or drinking dens. A glossy veneer and neon lights, covers the bear-pits of that deeper despair within, the markers of poverty. Cheap beer is available at any number of places, at any time of the day. But coffee and a place to quietly muse is lacking. We are no longer to be that kind of people. So I wind up, like all the others of my obsolete generation, eventually, at a garden centre. This one is unknown to me, an hour's drive away up the M6. It's the drive I need as much as anything, though I note the price of fuel is rising exponentially again, and gives me pause. But the coffee is good, and welcome.

I am more disturbed by the world of the pebble eyed men than I care to admit. I do not fear them, as much as I lament their creeping presence, not for myself, you understand? For myself, I

keep telling myself I am done with it. It is more for you, my pity, for you. And how hollow my advice must sound, that you cannot fight it, that the best, the only thing you can do it to manage your emotions, and your expectations.

Just ask for Piotr. It will be good idea for you to get around to it quick.

Conclusions, and symbolic interpretations please, George:

Well... obviously, my early life is being consumed by the corruption of contemporary reality, and I lament that, for fear the story of my life, that act between my birth and death, will come to mean nothing, that there will be no memorial to it. I had always hoped to return one day to the magic of my childhood, only now to find it is no longer there. We all do this. This is the way, and the lesson of all the generations before me, and the cards would say I am clinging to an illusion.

Then I have a girl of supernatural ability, and possibly elvish descent on a boat, making its way towards me, and rather more quickly than I had anticipated. There is something archetypal about that, something of the mythic, but only in retrospect. If I did not know any better, I would think Winona was not her real name, but that it was Sharon – this being a pun on "Charon", ferryman of the shades.

When I am with her she is good company, and a cheeky kind of fun. But in mythological parlance, she might also be a harbinger of death. Also, it must be said, the fact she is quick to anger suggests she is trailing Karma, as am I, of course, which puts her on the road to becoming a dangerous kind of magician. And me? It makes me a sloppy kind of mystic, sometime plugged in, but mostly not. As for Karma, I was rather hoping mine had been repaid. Clearly, I am still in considerable debt.

As for the absurd, I have a vampish spy kidnapping me on occasion, reminding me all the more of the illusory nature of everything we think we have built, that the doors we open do not necessarily lead to where we intend. And then I have Elaine, the muse who at once became flesh, to challenge me with the notion I might not yet be so thoroughly a-sexual as I think I am, that it is not that I do not desire women any more, only that I *fear* desiring them, that to desire them closes the way to what is beyond human, and for which I must remain comfortably celibate. And finally, there is the key, the symbol in the password to the McGuffin she has given

me, and which I wear now, on a metaphorical chain around my neck.

"After dinner, I will give it to you George. No, after we have made love George. No, after you have rescued me from my mother, George."

"But my dear Elaine, you cannot be rescued if you do not want to be. And surely you do not. It is in your DNA. It is in the very myth of your inner-most being that you shall never be free to love a man. You are to be eaten alive by your mother be she alive or dead. And no matter how you complain of it, you submit to it willingly. Indeed, you enjoy it. It defines you."

What?

"What do I mean by that?"

No, I do not say this out loud. Nor is Mr Williams actually here when he takes the opposite side of the table, settles down with his cup of tea. He takes a thoughtful sip, which steams his glasses. He removes them, wipes each twinkling circular lens on his handkerchief. You think I'm joking? I see him plain as day. You think I'm mad? I've already explained that. You know I am.

"Hey up then, young George."

Hey up.

What's up?

What's up, of course, what puzzles me is still the meaning of things, even though I already hold the secret of a greater meaning to the notion of being than is shared by most. I mean, that we are each of us dreamed into being, and will return to the dreamer, to what the Hindu calls Brahman. Does that make the story of our lives here of no consequence? Or does the state of our being at the moment of waking, or as others would say, dying, does that state – the sum of our story, and our glory – shape the opening paragraph of our next mode of being? Does it define the boundary conditions of our terms of being, elsewhere?

Mind yourself, and never mind the rest.

A lone tree falls. It makes no sound.

Now you are speculating, George.

I know. I'm not making much sense either.

But you see, it's not the truth of the matter that concerns me, as much as having the freedom to pursue it. There may be further clues along the way, among the dust and detritus of the seemingly profane. It interests me that others will not leave me alone to ponder these matters, that I am still mired in all the tiresome

pettiness, and no doubt shall be until the ending of my days. This is my story, still. It is *my* dream, to be interpreted as best I can. And whatsoever I conclude, shall be my destiny in the next life.

The next life. There I have said it. And why not?

No pressure then.

I wonder, is dear Mr Williams wandering his personal nirvana with a Voigtländer, taking pictures of achingly beautiful sunsets? Is my father, meanwhile, tending the garden of his dreams? And will I be exploring an endless waterway, in a prettily painted boat, with an imagined girl, who is not my daughter, but whom I wish was indeed... my daughter, then I would not have to desire her in the conventional way? Of one's time in the ever after, they say the first ten thousand years are the worst, after which, one is begging for annihilation. It's easy to understand why, given our simplistic notion of time. But since there is no such thing as time to pass, if a moment were the same as eternity, then what?

Mr Williams gives me a conspiratorial wink. Then he pops his spectacles back in place, tips his finger to the brim of his Trilby, and drifts away, the magnificent machinery of that Voigtländer, slung over his shoulder. He does not mean for me to follow. It's not time. My time is here, still, pondering the unwholesome noise that would distract me, distract us, at every turn...

From The Secret.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The Fullness of Being

In which, we discuss meditation, magical mushrooms, and the nature being. We discuss also legal matters pertaining to this and that, and set in train the acquisition of a shed-load of dark money, this being in exchange for letting go of our past. And we discover we are being followed, from which we surmise Tamara is reminding us we have a job to do, and we had better get on with it. And if it is not Tamara, then we're in even bigger trouble. So...

Winona has made it as far as the potteries now, including negotiating another tunnel, alone. She says she was not troubled by rear-enders this time. She also says she cast a spell for protection, and the Goddess saw her through, and she wonders why she did not think to do this on the first occasion. I do not doubt her, and wish only a similar protectress for my own hide, which seems in increasing danger of being tanned.

The propulsion batteries are exhausted, she says, so has moored up in a place exposed to the full arc of the sun, with the intention of spending the week, allowing them to replenish. And she has begun stocking up on logs for the burner. It's true, the boat does not perform as well on long cruises, through the autumn and winter months, and autumn is almost upon us, now. There is, however, sufficient juice for domestic purposes. She asks if all is well with me, and would not normally enquire, except the cards indicate things might not be, and since she is my friend, would I like to talk about it?

Yes, I would. It's touching she should think to enquire of the cards on my behalf. I would like to tell her everything, but I have been overdoing the indiscretions to the extent of putting others at risk.

All is fine with me, I tell her.

She knows I am lying.

There is a clue in the camera. Which camera is that, you ask. Mr William's Voigtländer. Remember? Since the universe is a dreamed concept, and we are alters of it, then we need to ask the question: are we among the dreamed things to be interpreted for meaning by *it*? Or do the things that strike us parade themselves as rich in meaning for our own interpretation?

My answer: Since interpretation requires sentience, and I do not propose the universe is itself a sentient non-thing, and certainly not a be-ing, that *we* are the emergent sentience of the universe, a widely dispersed, collective sentience, and so then yes, we can read the events, and the things that unfold around us, in one of two ways: meaning-less, or meaning-full, depending on our attachment to the material view, or lack thereof.

And, as you may have gathered by now, I am somewhat lacking in my faith for the material.

But we were talking about the camera. Yes, the camera, whether you like it or not, it must be faced.

The Voigtländer is an old camera. More than that, it is a classic, suggestive therefore of values we look back upon with fondness and nostalgia, for a time we imagine in which things were valued that are not valued any more. And what things are they, you ask. Well, search your heart. You need not answer in words. Feelings will suffice. How many photographs has it taken by now? How many ideas of the world has it considered? How many of those images or ideas were over, or under exposed? How many blurred? How many were pleasing to the mind's eye? How many were tack-sharp and sure of themselves?

My memory of the richest years of my life is rendered somewhat blurry now. I have explained the reasons for this. But I am no less aware of my own self on account of that. Memories, thoughts, emotions, I have found these do not define one's self at all. I can take a step back from them, observe them as things I experience, but without owning them.

I have read there is a loosening of the mind in those who have suffered lesions of the brain, result of surgeries, as if damage to the brain opens the mind to other possibilities. My own brain is full of lesions, invisible to the scans, but still lacking in function, as if entire parts of me were erased. It does not limit my potential, except within the limited bounds of the material world. As regards the totality of being, however, it rather opens things up.

I can say I am angry, in which case I lose my self in the anger, and imply by carelessness of language I am anger itself. Or I can say I am merely experiencing anger, in which case the anger falls away, having been recognised as this thing that is apart from my self. That's a bad illustration, since I have not felt anger for such a long time.

What about love, then?

Might I at least experience love, say when I am in company with Elaine Dodds?

Well, might I?

Sadly, I think not. With Elaine it is admiration, and a sadness.

Winona, now... I do love. But that is different. It is mostly something I project, this sense of otherness about her. It is not that I wish to possess her, more to protect her.

What else?

Oh, I don't know.

There is a rush of thoughts. I observe them jostling for position. Each poses a question to which there is no answer. They are embarrassed to be caught out, to find me observing them from this altitude, and they slink away. The altitude is gained, partly by the damage to my brain, partly by patience with meditation, which, like the various psychedelic compounds – natural and otherwise – further shut down parts of the brain – albeit temporarily.

Having once travelled in the east, I would like to say I learned to meditate in one of the hallowed places – an ashram, say, in the foothills of the Himalaya, or on China's legendary Wudang Mountain, or in the shadow of Japan's Mount Fuji. But it was in the musty church halls of the English home counties. Many westerners find such psychological methods useful in dealing with the anxiety caused by their world collapsing around them, to say nothing of the toxicity of their workplaces, and values they are taught to cherish, but against which their unconscious self instinctively rebels.

They worry they are going insane, and it can take their whole lives to realise there is no merit in adjusting themselves to fit in with such a badly damaged society, that in doing so, they merely partake of the lie, and die with it. Others, if they are receptive, can be shown The Secret. Thus the secret moves from the East, as the sun of materialism rises upon it, to the West, where that particular sun is setting, at least for the majority for whom these days even the most basic and functional of material possessions, like a tank of petrol, are becoming too difficult, and too expensive to acquire.

Ah, yes... that again.

I am reminded of the scent of church halls now, as I sit here in the reception area of the solicitors office. It's not that the place has the same smell, indeed far from it. The receptionist wears Chanel Number 5, a scent from heaven, if ever there was one. No, it's more

the waiting. In the waiting, the mind at ease pulls down the sense of meditative calm, and the breath sinks. With time, I can feel myself expanding against the walls of the materially enclosed experience. The walls feel like they are made of eggshell. Press too hard and they will crack, and the whole of unregulated being will flood in – the brain being what regulates one's being to within manageable levels. It's what happens with psychedelics. We break through the shell, into a topsy-turvey world. And without adequate protection, such an experience can leave us stupefied or, again, it can transform us, take us from what we perceive to be the ruins of life, into the mysteries of one's purpose.

Yes, I've studied the psychedelics, also the books of those who have travelled the rabbit holes. It was a threat assessment, like all the others. Why else do you think psychedelics were so severely proscribed, when we turn a blind eye to weed and coke? Psycho active substances reveal too much of The Secret, and the secret is apt to make a man behave in peculiar ways. So no, I don't want to go too far away from myself, and break through the shell. At least not here, and not anywhere until I have built a half-way house in my head, and where I can meet the daemons in a controlled way. Otherwise they would devour me, a lone and somewhat naive traveller in a strange land.

I wonder if that's the reason I no longer pursue the sexual life. Sorry, I'm jumping around here, but such are my thoughts today. Bear with me. You know, when the sex is done, and you lie back in that post coital daze? Well the contemplative life has a way of bestowing that feeling upon you all the time, and for no more effort than this: just sitting. Post coitus, and for a short time, all our wants are sated, are they not? and there is nothing more to be achieved in life. We have erased everything we think we are, in that one act, and what is left, at last, is who we are.

And who are we?

Well, in that moment, and ever so briefly, we are nobody, yet we are everyone, and every thing.

Sex is wonderful, isn't it? Perhaps I should look it up again, if only for recreation.

But were I to begin *needing* it, *craving* it, like in the old way, as a younger man, with Elaine Dodds perhaps, I would know at once something was wrong.

The mind wanders. Where were we? Or more to the point where

are we? Ah... yes... the offices of the redoubtable Arnold Rudgely.

"Mr. Rudgely will see you now, Mr Swift."

"Thank you."

I have not taken Elaine's advice regarding solicitors. I hope she will forgive me. I have travelled into Manchester, to an office I have used before, and which is indirectly connected to a certain cohort of the past service, whilst also being unknown to the present. So many of the independent firms are being melted down in takeovers and acquisitions now, and it's harder to find a face one is likely to see more than once. Arnold Rudgely is such a man, sole proprietor, of similar years to myself, a man also of long experience, great courage, and legendary discretion. You will not find him on social media.

Why am I here? Well, in part, it is to sell my father's house to the current incarnation of the pebble eyed man. As the police detective unnecessarily pointed out, to accept finances from such a character will be to most likely exchange my past for ill gotten gains. Proofs will be required of his money's non-existent legitimacy, and this will be supplied by solicitors familiar with that side of things, and how to shine it over, or to at least smudge out the traces of wrong-doing. To deal with such people requires experience and pragmatism, and one’s own specialists at law. The Patricians of England excel in such matters. So...

"Mr Swift, what pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Rudgely."

We shake hands. It's not a common gesture, still. The pandemic left deep scars in that respect, among all but the most closely connected. Clearly, he feels we are of such a closed circle, as I suspect we probably are. I trust him not to infect me, as he trusts me not to infect him. I speak metaphorically, now.

He resembles an undertaker; dark suit, white shirt and black tie, an expression of seriousness, even mourning. He is the keeper of my last will and testament. There are also certain papers containing guarantees of safe passage, something of a nuclear option, and difficult to predict the consequences of, should they ever come to light, which I suppose one day they might – information I came by in the course of my work, oh, years ago now, regarding certain persons of high regard, and their less well regarded connections. I don't wish to make too much of this, only to say many in my position avail themselves of the same rainy day opportunities. Few,

however have the wits or the courage to make use of such – in their own lifetimes at least – and I am one of those.

But anyway, down to business. I set in motion the sale of the treasure of my past for fifty pieces of silver, or was it forty? I paraphrase the scriptures here, and they are not my strong point. But not to do so – sell I mean – would be to risk a fuss, and violence, possibly involving firearms. And anyway, it has become an object lesson in letting go. My best, my most innocent years were spent around Marsden, and Durleston wood. But I intend never to see them again, after today. They shall exist always in memory, as they were, of course, if not in fact.

While I am here, I make a change to my will, and make it known also I am seeking contact with a certain person whose whereabouts, indeed whose very identity is likely to be known only to Rudgely. I have no means of knowing if said personage wishes to get in touch, but if they so do, I am to be contacted through Rudgely's office. It's a complex arrangement, and I'll explain more later, if need be, but suffice it to say, I am in need of wise counsel from a player of the great game, who is, or rather was, a magician of considerable power.

And that is that. A quick visit to Turner and Millais in the city gallery, a late lunch, then we head back to Oxford Road, and our train.

Manchester is not what it was when I was a student here. It was not a pretty town in those days – that would have been in the later seventies, and the early eighties. One cannot help but admire the new concrete and glass of its soaring aspirations. But travel a few miles in any direction from this mostly foreign owned hub, and you will find the true story of England, as lived by the ninety nine percent. In the seventies, the buses worked, and one could expect a seat on the train at rush hour, to say nothing of a doctor's appointment when you needed one. The direction of travel is not encouraging, and I do not expect a renaissance of our fortunes any time soon.

Remember, mind yourself only, and never mind the rest.

This morning I am a sardine squashed between armpits, as the vintage Sprinter splutters out of town. Then it bucks its way like a lame horse, through the urban wastelands, to Middleton, where I have left the vehicle. I should add I believe I am followed.

I picked them up at the gallery. Tamara does not do me the

justice of dispatching experienced hands, or I would not have spotted them. They are trainees, I suppose, a young man and a woman, pretending to be a couple but lacking the necessary chemistry. Perhaps her team is on a shoestring, or she has arranged it in order to let me know I am watched, that the game is still on, and I have a job to do. That she saves money in the process is merely win-win.

Too much, George.

You are seeing patterns in everything. They are not following you at all. They are just an ordinary couple who got on the train at the same time, and then off again. It was just a coincidence.

But anyway, it reminds me: What are we to do about Elaine?

Chapter Thirty

The Hotel by the Lake

In which... we entertain Elaine at an hotel by a lake and which, like everything else we once knew, is changed. The hotel, I mean, and not the lake. But is this not saying something also about your self, George? How old are you? Sixty? But sixty is the new forty! There are pop stars twenty years your senior making come-backs and impregnating girls who are younger even than Winona. Can you not come back just a little yourself? Why all this old fart stuff? It is possible to be younger in outlook, without indulging in disgusting behaviour? Meanwhile, Elaine is charming and playful. So...

It's just another hotel, now, another place from the past that is not quite what it was. The lounge is filled with old waxworks. One of them is at least a decade my senior. Look at him! It could even be me, except he is making out with a girl in her thirties. Her dress is too tight, her fashion and make-up are of the Insta generation. Her copious bosom spills over. See how he paws at her, and talks too loudly. Bear witness to my immortality, he's saying, admire my prowess. See how I lap up this luscious, creamy bosom. As for the girl, she says: admire my boobs and my bum. She is the daughter I never had to admonish, and warn against men like him.

Elaine, meanwhile, is elegant in a ruby dress. She wears a wrap to cover the delicate allure of her bare shoulders. Yes, I admit, I do find her shoulders alluring. Her hair is fastened in the beehive style, and from her ears there dangle plain gold droppers. Her ears are delicate, and distinctly human. There is none of your exotic Elven-princess pointiness about Elaine. She has made a great effort for the evening, and, as a gentleman, it is my duty to honour that without indulging in public displays of lasciviousness. We are of course, the pair of us, so terribly last century.

Rather than disapproving of the unseemly display, she seems amused by it. There is clearly much she can teach me about the virtues of a more non-judgemental way of being, of minding myself. But that was my lot, I suppose: always making judgements. And my judgement here would have been, and still is to a degree, that the fool's weakness for young women would have made him an excellent target for the intelligence services, had he been in a position to furnish us with much useful intelligence, which I doubt,

but one never knows.

Anyway, I would have expected better for an hotel of this calibre. So many of those with money these days lack class. Is that too snobbish of me? Manners, decorum, mutual respect? Yes, yes... I know what I sound like, but these things are important in holding society together. Yes, we know it's an act, but it helps us get along, and anyway is much less hurtful than insulting strangers as we do now on social media. As for the hotel, I conclude it is rather fallen to the level of the money which, these days, and like much of my own – soon to be – is somewhat grubby.

The waiter, a young black man, calls us to our table. He is effortlessly pleasant, but unshaven, and his tie is skew-wiff. I forgive him his wilting appearance, since I know for a fact he has been working twelve hours, and thus understandably, struggles to maintain an air of well groomed efficiency. I have been watching him throughout the day. He is robustly measured in his manner, in contrast to the managerial grades here, who are snooty towards customers, and beastly to their staff.

I hope at least dinner justifies the price.

For a long time now, the fashion has been for men to dispense with ties, to wear their suits with an open necked shirt, or even to wander in to dinner wearing shorts and tee-shirt, though only the wealthiest and most confidently self entitled would ever attempt the latter. I don't know if Elaine finds me old fashioned in this. It does worry me a little, since she is so effortlessly chic, and I would not like to spoil the evening for her by my appearances. Were she my wife I would have no trouble in seeking and respecting her advice. As her escort, I feel I should perfect myself, for her pleasure. For her part she seems relaxed, with just the hint of something secret in her smile.

She has been pampered in the day, massaged with oils, and has swum in the ornately tiled pool. I did not join her for the swim, but observed her briefly, and quite by accident, through the glass behind the reception desk, as I booked our table for this evening. She wore a black one-piece, swam with an admirable ease, carried herself with the deportment of a dancer. She was beautiful in the flesh – or rather in more of the flesh than, thus far, I am used to seeing her.

From the corner of my eye I also observed what I took to be the same young couple from the train out of Oxford Road. Again,

Tamara insults my intelligence, or both my imagination and my memory are ganging up on me, which is equally likely. They were having drinks in the bar, and linger in the lobby, now, pretending to study the menu. I pass them with Elaine – the waiter carrying our drinks on a silver salver – I kid ye not. As late-comers, they are shown to a table in the corner, but they prefer a different one, closer to ours. There is a fuss. They draw attention to themselves. Their clumsiness is curious – unprofessional certainly – but surely, I imagine it. I am becoming paranoid, but why would I? And then what if we are indeed watched? Do I tell Elaine we are under close observation? That we are possibly even recorded? It's important we don't deviate from the script, you see? That we are establishing an intimate relationship. What Tamara must not find out is that I have already betrayed her for a higher level of the game.

Too late.

Now we are sitting and the waiter is doing his thing with Elaine's chair. She is thanking him, and then...

"So, George, how did you manage to spend the afternoon while I was in the spa? You weren't too bored, I hope?"

"Oh, not at all. I took a walk down by the lake. I've not been here for years. It was very pleasant."

"How do you know the hotel? Don't tell me, this is where you used to bring all your conquests."

How sweetly she teases.

What is the couple doing? Read them George?

They don't look overly absorbed in one another – that same ill suited chemistry – and that's not right for ones so young. Watchers are better trained than that. They really would be invisible. You would not have noticed them. If you think you are followed, it is either a warning, or you imagine it. What was Elaine asking me? Do keep up, George!

My conquests? Did I bring my conquests here?

"Alas no. In the days when I was young enough to have had conquests, I lacked the finances – also, it has to be said, the conquests. No, I used to come to walk the hills. Mostly, I was alone. It was a convenient little spot, and quite homely in those days, privately owned. I knew the family. Now of course it belongs to a corporate chain with shareholders, I suppose. Sadly, I feel it's no longer as homely as it was."

"Oh, I don't know. I've found it quite pleasant."

"You're very kind, though I fear you're right. I mean about the difference between English and Continental hotels."

"Ah... that. You know, I have a theory about you, George Swift. Do you mind if I test it?"

"Em... go ahead."

"Tell me, do you know Paris at all?"

"A little."

"Then tell me also, where do you feel most at home? In London or in Paris?"

"Well, Paris, of course. I've never really cared for London – always found it rather cold and rude. Self absorbed, too. Parisians are infamous for being rude, of course, though that was not my experience as a rule – indeed I always found the Parisians to be charming. And if they were rude, on occasion, it was with a sincere passion, never with indifference."

"Poor George."

"Oh?"

"I was right. You're too European to be an Englishman any more."

"Ah, that. You're right. I am a man without a country. Still... here we are. And no escape from fortress Albion."

She frowns. "Is the hotel really no longer to your liking?"

"Oh, It's pleasant enough. And your company makes up for any shortcomings it might have."

"Are you flirting?"

"Perhaps a little. I should make the effort, I think."

"And nicely done. I like it when you flirt with me. Please feel free to do it more often."

"And you, Elaine? Where are you most comfortable? Paris or London?"

"I'm fond of neither. I'm a country girl. I was born in Annency. Do you know it?"

This is news. "Really? When we first met, I had this idea there was something French about you? Yet, you have no trace of an accent."

"Well, my father was French. We came to England when I was small. My mother..." she pauses there, at the mother, thinks perhaps about going on, struggles with a bitterness in her mouth. Then, at last: "She hated France. Hated all things French. Including, in the end, my father."

I try to steer things away from the mother. The mother will kill her, and I would rather that be later than sooner. Indeed, much, much later. "Annency is very beautiful."

"You know it?"

"A little. I know lots of places, a little."

"I used to promise myself, when mother is dead, I'll go back. I have aunts, there, still. Lovely, kind creatures they are. Never a negative word about anything or anyone."

"Ah..." Unlike the mother, I presume.

"Sorry, George."

"Sorry?"

"My mother seems to pop into every conversation we have."

"She does. But not to worry."

She lifts the menu, hides her face. "Enough, now... what shall we have?"

"You can have anything you like, Elaine."

"Ah, now, don't tempt me, George."

If the watchers *are* watchers, and they are recording us, they don't get much. We are a middle aged couple, newly met, exploring the safe zones. We are prim, upright, mannerly. We are of a generation perhaps closer akin to our parents than our selves. And we are surprisingly sincere, I mean for a couple carrying on in such an elaborate deceit. Elaine would make a good spy, adapting herself so well to the legend, and believing in it. And of course I have not completely dismissed the idea... that she might indeed be a spy. But that's just paranoia and the strangeness of my psyche – somewhat bent out of shape as it is.

I grant the hotel full marks for the meal, which is pleasant, and not overly heavy on the digestion. England, in general is fucked, but occasionally, still surprises in its little pockets of resistance. We retire to the lounge for coffee, find ourselves alone there for a time, comfortable in deep leather. The pawing septuagenarian and the pneumatic girl have gone.

She smiles. "This has been lovely, George. Thank you." And then, with a furtive glance over her shoulder to make sure the room is empty: "Do you think they're onto us?"

"They?"

"There was a couple at the table next to ours. I just... I felt they were watching us. Him particularly. He kept looking in our direction. Or am I letting my imagination get the better of me? You

didn't notice them?"

Elaine felt it too? "I saw them, yes. But... well... if what you say is true, it would be rather clumsy of them. When under surveillance by the professional services, it's such a fine art, really, one would never know."

"I just wondered. Also..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you think our rooms might be bugged?"

Well, I suppose they might. I'd not thought of that. "Oh... now Elaine..."

She lays her palm over her bosom, I presume in order to protect her modesty. "Little cameras, watching us, while we undress? Do you think?"

Well, naturally one always assumes such a thing in hotels, or at least one used to, especially when working overseas in the diplomatic services. And that may well be the case here, as she so fears. Ordinarily, I wouldn't put it past Tamara, either. But I imagine the machinery watching us is rather small, being very much on a shoestring, if our watchers are an example of it, *I mean if they are watchers*. Still... do I play to these fears, or do I deflate them? And then, why is she asking? Does the thought disturb her, as well it might? Or does it, in fact – how shall I say – excite her? Oh, Lord... I pray we are not awakening deep desires. How peculiar. Damn them. Damn, Tamara for sending watchers so gauche even an ingénue like Elaine could spot them. Sorry, I retract that – anyone can see Elaine is not an ingénue, but you know what I mean.

They're not watchers, George. You're getting muddled, and your memory is letting you down. They were not on the train from Oxford Road. This is a different couple altogether. Oh... hell, why could I not be left to retire in peace? My senses are letting go of the world, and I was happy to let them, since I was no longer interested in the tumbling world, and its interminable woes. But I cannot now reverse the process and sharpen up to the degree that is required here. It's too late. Everything is too late. All I want is to lay in my bunk on the Lady Lucy, while Winona steers us over the glassy waters.

What? No, that's just weird, George.

"Would you mind... taking a look?" she asks.

"Em... a look? At?"

"In my room. You must have some idea where such things might

be hidden?"

Actually none whatsoever, but since it's merely reassurance she seeks, then I'm happy to oblige, except I'm reluctant to enter the sanctity of her room, and half suspect this might be a ruse to get me in there for goodness knows what. That's something else I feel I'm no longer sharp enough to deal with. And then of course, to my relief, I realise:

"It does rather give the game away, though, if we are observed looking for what might be looking at us, don't you think?"

"Oh. Good point. That would be rather silly, wouldn't it? Ignore me, George. I'll simply get ready for bed in the bathroom, slip into bed wearing my dressing gown."

Though of course, the bathroom, as I recall, is one of the more favoured locations for surveillance devices. Hell, she's got me at it now. The sooner we're on our way home the better.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Elaine. As for the couple at dinner – he was obviously merely entranced by you."

She gives me a disapproving tut, then a playful half-smile. "Or bored by his wife?"

"Oh, I don't know. The lady in the yellow frock? She was passably attractive, I thought. Vivacious smile."

"For the waiter, yes. You liked her? Perhaps we should swap partners for the evening. Shall we ask them? Here they come."

“What?”

Elaine greets the couple as they enter the lounge. "Good evening."

They look like they've walked into a mine-field. It's the guy who speaks. He's a well dressed chap, pale jacket, Chinos, dark complexion. "Em... good evening."

Accent? French? I wasn't expecting that. I mean that is French, isn't it?

Elaine irradiates him with her widest smile. "We noticed you at the table next to ours, at dinner. Would you like to join us for coffee?"

He looks alarmed. *"Em... Je suis désolé, nous... nous sommes français. Euh... Je ne comprends pas... euh..."*

Ha. Nice one. He claims not to understand us. But he was articulate enough, in English, before dinner, when demanding to be moved to another table. But wait. What is Tamara doing dispatching French people to watch us? That doesn't make sense at

all. Nothing, these days, makes any sense. We need more input, George. No... no.. we need less, much less.

But Elaine is not done, transforms herself into Belle de Jour, positively channelling Catherine Deneuve. She makes introductions, entirely in character, invites them to join us. "*Mais ce n'est pas un problème. Je suis aussi français. Voici mon ami, Georges. Je suis Élaine. S'il vous plaît, venez, rejoignez-nous.*"

The woman takes charge now, makes hurried apologies. They are late, and must be going. *"Nous sommes désolés. Euhh... nous sommes très en retard. Nous devons partir..."*

And with that they u-turn from the lounge and retreat. Well... that *was* awkward. But also something of a relief.

"Clearly they don't like the cut of your suit, George."

"What's wrong with my suit?"

"Fancy... them being French – and we were talking about me being French. Isn't the universe strange sometimes? Do you think we attract coincidences?"

"Ah, now don't get me started on that one."

"Still, they could hardly have been watching us, could they. Their English was rather poor, as was their French, I'd say."

"You think so?"

"The accent was wrong... Eastern European. Pretending to be French. They must have thought we were really stupid to fall for that one. You speak Russian, George?"

"The odd phrase, nothing more. But they weren't Russian. I know a Russian accent."

"When it's speaking French? That's very cosmopolitan of you."

I straighten my face with a smile. She is dangerous company, reminds me of Tamara in some ways. But she also speaks French like a native, because well, it turns out she is one. A native, I mean. And as all Englishmen know, there is nothing quite like a lady who speaks French, or more to the point *is* French. Or is that just me? Forgive me, I'm avoiding the key implication here, which is: Eastern Europeans speaking French. Or possibly *Russians* speaking French. I'm not sure. Heavens.

I truly hope there is not a Russian dimension, though it would not surprise me. Under most English stones, especially the ones paving the streets of the shining citadel, there is still to be found a wealth of Russian money, and influence, not withstanding recent actions, and resultant censure. They have been making monkeys out

of us with ruthless tenacity for decades, and continue to do so. And in the kingdom of the wild, they are a dangerous species, favouring all manner of poison. Poison makes a fuss, broadcasts itself, discourages liberties, weakens the resolve of enemies.

She takes a business card from her bag, hands it over. There is a pass-code written on the back of it.

"Dinner was lovely, George. Thank you. Here. As promised."

The waiter brings coffee. He looks, by now, like he's fit to drop.

The password gets a glance before I slide it into my pocket. It's a clever one, easy for a human being to memorise, but the kind that would take the most powerful of our machines a thousand years to crack. And the memory stick she gave me grants only three attempts. I know. I've already checked. There's some cyber-security training there. Something is not right about Elaine. Or do I overstate the problem? What happens when every connection in the world seems connected to every other? Can anything at all be said to mean anything? I don't know.

Shall we find out?

Chapter Thirty One

The Red Room and the Devil

In which we explore the very human trait of holding two opposing ideas to be true, at the same time. We speak of my fear of both a Russian angle to the McGuffin that is my story's plot, and, worse what it might be that Elaine wants from me, in return for that password. I explain the potency of the alchemical mix of feelings of loneliness, love, the desire for connection, and just a hint of the erotic, and what such a thing can achieve in elevating a man to another plane of being. We speak of the difficulty in existing as a disembodied psyche, and how we must use imagination to construct a simple boundary which grants the illusion of being, We discover how, in the nature of our more mundane reality, most of us think ourselves free, not realising we are chained and in thrall to the devil, that this is the devil's genius. We speak briefly of sexual matters, and gather we are challenged to consider our life's legacy, also to whom it shall be passed on. So...

My room comes with a private balcony, and it is not red. My room, I mean. I shall explain about the red room, and the devil in a moment. But for now all you need to know is the night is warm, and I am far from sleep, so I sit out, alone. I am both relieved and saddened to be apart from Elaine, which is interesting, and a feeling worth exploring for its transcendent potential. I hope I am wrong about that couple, and if I am not, I hope they are at least not Russian.

Note: I both do and do not want to be with her. But which is the truer feeling? Wanting to be with, or without? Yes, a man can hold two opposing ideas in his head at the same time, believing them both to be true, and how we reconcile that paradox is what defines us as human beings. Lesser creatures would be driven mad by such a logical impasse. So, is it weakness or strength that has me choosing solitude? Am I merely afraid of what women want in return? You get the picture?

There is a moon coming up to full. It lights the not too distant lake a pale silver. The lawns of the garden, dewy now in the night air, are rendered blue, while the trees are tall and black against a midnight sky. The sky is streaked with yellow, spidery, noctilucent clouds, both beautiful and other-worldly. Mountains rise in silhouette. I know, I know... you couldn't care less about the scene,

nor the atmosphere. All you want to know is will Elaine and I have sex.

I'm coming to that.

I have walked Elaine to her door, and now retired to my privacy. For an awkward moment I thought she would invite me in. I think she read that thought and enjoyed it, then winked and said goodnight. She seeks the measure of me through the levels of my embarrassment. What she has learned thus far, I cannot imagine, except, I hope, that my primary goal is most definitely not her sexual conquest. Apologies, dear reader but there we are. But what about Elaine? What about her intentions?

Here I am then, thus far unscathed and virginal. Mission accomplished. I have the password, and have used it to open the memory stick, which I found crammed with one hundred and twenty eight gigabytes of information, or padding, or worse, *disinformation*. It will need to be searched by the service's iron brain. There is more than a lifetime for a whole bureau of human beings to analyse that lot, and I suspect the service is rather thinly stretched. I trust Tamara knows what she's looking for. Such is the problem with bulk intelligence – it's only useful in retrospect, and by then it is too late for anything but fitting the man into the frame of a thing that has already happened, rather than preventing that thing from happening in the first place.

So, now – and yes I'm sorry – I contemplate this rather beautiful scene. I am feeling a little lonely. I am feeling also a little in love, wondering what it would have been like to be lying in the intimate embrace, and the scent of an Elaine Dodds. Heavens, George! The mixture of loneliness, chaste love, the desire for connection, and just a hint of the erotic, are a powerful mixture, especially so in a setting as beautiful as this.

Which is the main point of what I am trying to tell you.

So, let me tell you what happens next.

There is a sensual trigger, a play of light, a movement of trees in air, the sigh of the breeze... and out you go. The shell that encloses the mind breaks, and you expand to fill your field of vision. Look at the mountain, you *become* the mountain. Feel the air on your cheek, you *are* the air. You are the sound of the trees moving in the breeze. You are the lone tree that falls.

There is no structure in this inner place, and without it one cannot operate as a being. To be mortal is to live within limitation.

Here, we are pure psyche, spirit possibly, I don't know. It will peter out, eventually, so you'd better hang on. Even the longest of times I have maintained this state would be, in mortal terms, no more than the time between heart-beats. Yet in that time – this timeless time – entire universes might be crossed, for we are also time, and thus we can be timeless if we choose.

Are you still with me?

All of this sounds like nonsense, I know. But then one cannot name the experience. There are no nouns here. It is ineffable. When words are all we have, we can only do our best, and grope towards it. Such, I believe, is also the experience of psychedelia. Anyway, the imagination is a useful ally in achieving some measure of stabilisation, and to this end I have constructed a mind-space I call the Red Room. You see? I told you I would get around to it.

This is the simplest environment I could devise, a mental space, within the infinite transcendent mind. It is easy to imagine – four walls, and a door. There are two chairs. I sit on one, and I wait to interview my guest, when, or rather if, they choose to appear through that door. Or sometimes I am the guest, and they come to question me.

My guest is often a woman, the embodiment of all the muses I have known. She is always kind, radiates comfort and sympathy, but never advances me a solution to the problems I bring. Is this to be believed in, or is it merely an hallucination, brought on by a damaged brain? Is it,... ughh,... pathological? I leave that for you to decide.

"Now then, young George."

Ah... Mr Williams, is it? White suit, in the style of the nineteen twenties, ditto Sunday shirt with stud collar and dickie bow. He looks younger than I remember – he always looked old to me, though he was perhaps no more than forty, when I was a boy. He's that age now, only younger in my eyes, by virtue of the fact I am already decades ahead of him.

He sits, crosses his legs, looks at me in paternal fashion, raises a brow as if to say: "Well?"

"So... can you help me, Mr Williams? The girls who've sat with me here have never offered counsel. Just made me feel better, which is always welcome. But it's counsel I need."

I don't speak these words. I imagine them, indeed, in part, I merely feel them.

I note he is without the Voigtländer.

From his inside pocket he takes out a wallet of the bifold type. Soft, calf leather, as was fashionable in the 1950s. He did this once before, when he was presenting me with that photograph of the sunset, remember? But instead of a photograph he now shows me a card. The Tarot: Ah... The Fool.

But we've already been here.

I know I am the fool, stepping blithely through a minefield. But towards what end?

"What aspect of my journey am I not understanding, Mr Williams? Am I to focus myself on eyeing the exit of my life? And if that's so, what is the meaning of the world, in these late attempts to entangle me in its banality? I mean, it's like it's trying to hold on to me, and I no longer care about it."

He nods in understanding of my dilemma. Or perhaps he nods because I imagine him, and he will respond in whatever way I desire. He will tell me whatever I want to hear. Except, then he pulls out the ten of pentacles, which makes no sense at all. Were I drawing cards for real I would assume I'd lost my focus, and drawn a dud.

The pentacles of the Tarot tell the story of acquisition, of security, of material stability. Their culmination is this image of an old, bearded man who wears a cloak, patterned with elaborate symbols. A young couple stand in the grounds of a fine villa, conversing, but they don't notice him. He is petting dogs. There are various interpretations of this one, all of them talking about wealth, both material and spiritual, and coming as a consequence of the path we have walked since youth.

It is a culmination of reward, a building upon the fruits of our generations. It is the possession of something to be passed on to those nearest and dearest. But this seems inappropriate, since, in the real world, this young couple might look and talk the part, being of the curated, social media generation, but the structure of their abode is cracking around them. They're in debt up to their eyeballs. Their house, their car, even the clothes on their back, all of it is rented, and soon they shall go naked into the world. They're oblivious to the crash.

As for my own nearest and dearest to benefit from the years of my endeavours, alas, I have nothing to give, no comfort, only the temptation to say I told you so, and against which I must bite my

tongue.

My generation made no difference. We chased shadows. We told ourselves we kept the West safe, and maybe we did, or maybe the players on both sides of the great game merely occupied each other's time, while the spivs of all nations grew fat behind our backs, and cleaned up. And at the crucial moment, post millennium, when we were most needed at poor Albion's barricades, we were looking the other way.

"I don't understand, Mr Williams. That's all gone now. My legacy means nothing. My generation wasted its efforts. Yours and mine. And I have no progeny to speak of."

In reply, another card: The Devil.

It gets worse. The devil presides over a naked man and a woman. They're chained together, and together they are chained to the devil's chair. They are trapped, but don't realise it. They are so deluded in thinking they're free, they do not notice their chains. How is the Devil relevant in this context?

The devil can be many things. It can be my shadowy self, the self I deny I am, or am capable of being. It can be the impulses I despise in others. Or equally they could be the impulses I deny in myself, and which I need to give vent to. Both of these things are what chain me. But how does this relate to the wasted generations, and the wealth of nations?

Mr Williams speaks.

"The times are breaking, George. Were you still blind, were you to remain chained to the Devil's chair, you would go down into the pit with everyone else. But your journey is still your journey, and what is accumulated in you are still your riches. If not in the material world, then..."

Ah... is he saying I am I to get my reward in heaven? Forgive me. I don't mean to be facetious. I don't know what's going to happen when my brain falls apart, but these inklings do give me pause. In some ways it would be easier to embrace annihilation than the possibility of some form of psychical continuation of being. What form would it take? And what would be its starting point?

"George, who are your loved ones? Who do you protect?"

"No one. Only myself, Mr Williams."

Another card... no, please, not another card: The King of Wands.

The King of Wands is a man in full possession of himself. He is the man with the plan, the mission, the assignment. The man who

leads, who takes the initiative. He is the saviour of his friends. He is the safe pair of hands, and the devil to his enemies.

"There, you see, Mr Williams? He is the exact opposite of who I am. I must always be polite, and tip-toe through life, for I never know who my enemies are. You can only take the fight to them, when you know who they are."

Mr Williams is about to reach for another card, but something disturbs him, and thank heavens, for I could not bear another one. He looks aside sharply. I sense something, but whether sight, sound, scent or touch, I do not know.

It's gone. The vision has gone. *Find out who they are and take the fight to them? Is that what he was saying? Or forget all that, for the times are breaking, and you decide who your progeny is to be, who is to be protected by you, the man with the plan...*

But I have no plan... not yet.

Anyway, where am I? Remind me. Ah... okay. Balcony. Hotel. Lake District.

Knocking.

What?

Door. Knocking.

Move to answer.

Strange feeling as the vision fades. What is that, George? Euphoria, is it? Careful what you do with that, now.

Who is at the door, what is it?

Ah... it is an Elaine Dodds. It is a long, satin dressing gown, and little underneath, at least nothing that gives much resistance to an impression of nipples. Alarming things – nipples, I mean. I don't know why they're so erogenous, when their function is decidedly not. Erogenous, George? Yes, yes... I feel a certain something at their loosely veiled appearance. They map uncomfortably to the idea of an erection, a stiffness, a desire to thrust.

What else have we here? Observe, George.

Hair brushed out, voluminous, soft. Bottle of wine. Two glasses.

Is this going where I think it's going?

"Hello, George. Not sleepy? Neither am I. So... can I come in?"

Chapter Thirty Two

A Gentle Dispatch

In which we reminisce about our time with Elaine. We speak of metaphysical, and even also certain delicate post mortem matters. Then we explain how things have moved on apace, that Winona draws ever closer to home. And we rendezvous with Tamara, talk shop, including how best she intends eventually disposing of me, should that, in the greater scheme of the material world, become necessary. So...

All right, then. In the universe of the transcendent mind, all things are true, since here begins the process by which things *become* true. Are you with me? Equally of course, all things are false, and for the same reason. I'm hoping somewhere between that null point of infinite im/possibility, and the denser levels of reality, what we call the real world, there is a summer-land, and there shall I abide, wilfully oblivious of its absurdity. There shall be a lake, and green hills, and a cottage of my own design, but already centuries old, and solid as rock – that is if rocks are solid, which of course they are not. But you know what I mean.

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,

And a small cabin build there...

William Butler Yeats?

Where did he come from? Yeats? Yeats? Arguably the last of the British Romantics. Initiate of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Another damned magician!

Where were we? Oh, yes... immortality...

But how long, you ask, would I last, before crying out for escape into limitation? Limitation where I could not drive a nail without a hammer, nor move an inch without stepping on someone's toes? For is such not the paradox of eternal being, in which one is lost for meaning without the ever-drawing near of death? As the old joke about immortality goes, and which I have mentioned before, it's the first ten thousand years that are the worst. But remember, that would be to factor time among the fundamental equations, and time is not an inherent property of the universe, at least not as it is in itself – only as we perceive it to be. Thus, I shall move back and forth as I please, and be damned to all ye naysayers.

I shall lie again with Elaine, as I did that night. I shall lie with her as often as I please, and each time fresh as the first, and I shall

not ask the question: what is it she wants from me? No, I shall not ask it, and I shall be free.

But as it is, or was, I do.

Ask the question, I mean.

What *does* she want? From me.

It would have been impolite to demur at the time – ungentlemanly even, given her intent – and I consider myself at the very least, a good actor. As for a gentleman, it depends how one defines the term, and not all definitions are complimentary. She was, of course, a delight. I had quite forgotten the joy of a silken vagina sliding over one's glans – forgive my plainness. Indeed I still catch my breath when I think of it. In short, the experience of making love with Elaine Dodds, was exquisite. And in truth, I don't think she wanted anything, other than the night itself. And now, since I am all out of superlatives, we should let the matter rest before you younger readers find mention of my ancient glans too revolting.

At breakfast, she was neat, and pressed, and twinkly cool again and, of what had happened, she said only that we need not speak of it, if I preferred. *Not speak of it again. Ever.* I made no reply, only smiled in that secret way which is meant to imply everything, yet which means nothing. Her scent was still a cloud of arousal surrounding me, rising from my very pores. The feel of her softness still charged my nerves, setting my fingertips aquiver, hungry for the touch of her...

Oh, indeed, Elaine Dodds moved me deeply. I recall she had once made a dismissive quip about the desultory act of "skin on skin". I don't know if she really meant it. If she did, she made a good show of it all the same. Skin on skin, I mean. Hers on mine.

I think back on it, now, as I sit in the car beneath the trees at Rivington, as I have thought of it often. Rivington, you ask? You can look it up. It's a hamlet on the edge of the Western Pennines, just a twenty minute drive from the farm, along narrow undulating moorland roads. These days it is populated by motorcycles aping the speed, and the fatality rate of the TT races. There is something terribly nihilistic about the times, don't you think? Strange, how a deeper contemplation of death has one value life all the more, see the magic in it. That's it, you see? A world without magic is a terrible place to be, but to have the magic restored encourages one to stick around.

Anyway, we were talking about Rivington. There is an avenue here, arrow straight, leading up to the old hall, popular with visitors. It's an unlikely place for a rendezvous with a spy-boss – with Tamara, I mean – this local beauty spot, but it was, none the less, of her choosing, and who am I to question her competence? What I shall tell her, I don't know, but things have moved on apace since last we spoke.

It's been a few short weeks now, since that extraordinary weekend with Elaine. In that time, Jasmine has been approached by what I suspect to be the smiling agents of the world's most severely frowning oligarchy – yes, in spite of all that has passed, their agents are still around, though keeping more to the shadows than once they did. They have made an offer for the farm that is ten times its worth. Somewhat ashen-faced, she sought my advice, which was mildly flattering, and I advised her to sell at once for fear the bastards would turn nasty, as is their wont. What the bastards want with the property fits an emerging pattern, and if things go to form, they will at once begin contesting rights of way, even rights of access to the moor. They will erect bulletproof screens around the homestead, and patrol the perimeter with unlicensed guns, to which the cops will be obliged to turn a blind eye. In the shorter term, however, the consequence is Jasmine, and not without considerable regret, has given us all our notices. We have six months to reorder our lives and quit.

My sanctuary is blown. I shall have to find another, and I am not currently favouring the boat. Not in the longer term.

Elaine has already made her plans. I am invited to visit her in the little seaside village of Saltwick, where she has been negotiating rooms for some time. She gave in her notice at the firm of Battecombe and Bailey, yesterday. All of this seems odd, though none of it concerns me. All that concerns me is that Winona has now moved the boat as far as Cheshire, is moored near the village of Lostock-Gralam. She is only a few weeks away from Middleton, which has about it a darkly symbolic aura now. Though, I suppose the only consequence will be I must decide what to do with her after that. The only thing slowing her progress is the greyness of the weather, which is rendering the Lady Lucy somewhat reluctant to charge.

Tamara arrives in the Porsche, parks beside me, steps out and sits in mine. Such a lovely car, that Porsche. I wonder if it is her

own. She smells of something sharp this morning.

"Hardly discreet, Tamara. The Porsche, I mean. Could you not think of trading it for something more mundane?"

"Oh, I don't know... everyone passing will be looking at the car. They won't notice this tired, middle aged couple sitting in this thing that is carefully crafted to look like an old banger, beside it."

Ah, so she's noticed the deceptively dishevelled nature of my vehicle. No surprises there, I suppose. "Thank you. I take your point. But I protest that you could never look tired, or middle aged."

She sighs, seems in no mood for banter this morning, which is a pity. It's one of the few things I enjoy about Tamara's company. "Lame attempt at flattery noted," she says. "I'd reciprocate in kind, but I had Sir Josh on my back all night, literally, and I'm feeling a little... unclean, this morning."

"Ah, I was about to ask if everything was all right. I guess that answers that one. And there was me thinking your mood was on account of the box tickers and bean counters."

She fakes a smile. "So... moving on... have you anything for me, George? Please tell me you do."

"What I have is good news, and bad news. And the good news is this." I hand her the memory stick.

"And what is this?"

"That's everything. That is the lock stock and barrel of Battecombe and Bailey. This is the password to the drive. I've had a quick look. It's solid with data, so I hope you know what you're looking for, and can therefore search wisely. Ask your questions of the device, and the device will speak to you."

She looks more relieved than I would have expected. It seems I have genuinely pleased her. "My dear, George. You're such a clever boy. And the bad news? You did say there was bad news?"

"The bad news is the ease with which it was obtained, I'm afraid. Were I you – and I'm glad I'm not, especially in Sir Joshua's company – I would suspect a case of misdirection. Tamara, have you had me followed? It is a serious question, though naturally, I take no offence if you cannot answer."

"Honest answer: no."

"Really? I admit to being a little surprised by that. But anyway, another serious question: have our Gallic cousins, perhaps acting as proxy for the European Union, any interest in the matters pursued by Messrs Battecombe and Bailey? I ask only because Elaine is a

French born citizen, and there was a peculiar incident at the hotel, all of which could be explained by the disintegration of my mind, and seeing patterns everywhere, or it could be something else, something far more embarrassing, as well as being one more tangent that I could well do without at this stage in my story."

"Such as?"

"That you wanted someone on the inside of the firm of Battecombe and Bailey, but that someone turns out to be already someone else's someone. Best case scenario that would be French. Worst case, Russian."

She thinks on this for a long time, frowns. And then: "George, Darling, you wouldn't be trying to blow smoke up my bottom, would you?"

The image leaves me momentarily nonplussed, and it takes a moment to gather myself. "Em... no, I wouldn't be trying to do that. I may be deceiving you, unintentionally, but only because I am myself confused, and possibly deluded."

Tamara takes this news with a poker face, but I suspect she also takes it seriously. How seriously, she cannot betray. "Elaine Dodds, working for the French? How fascinating. I refuse to believe there's a Russian dimension. They're watched so closely these days, by departments with bigger budgets than mine. But you're right, in either case that would indeed be embarrassing, for us, and for them. So... I'll look into it and let you know."

"I don't need to know. So... are we done?"

"Not so fast. No, I'm not *done* with you yet. Tell me, what's your assessment? I mean of the big picture, here. What are we looking at?"

"I'm not looking at a picture. Indeed, Tamara, my eyes are firmly closed."

"You must have some ideas?"

"On the contrary, I have none. I've not been briefed. It's not my business to make an assessment of anything, picture or otherwise. You asked for information. You asked me, on pain of withholding my pension, to seduce a woman who is probably innocent, but possibly a French or a Russian diplomatic plant, in order to get it, which in the end, and fortunately, was not necessary. That's the limit of my involvement."

"But just supposing."

"Supposing what?"

"I was your lead, and I wanted an *assessment*. Honestly, George, I'm flying by the seat of my pants, and would appreciate your input, darling."

"Then, in all modesty, I suggest you can't keep a lid on it for much longer."

"It? What *it*?"

"You know very well what *it*. And *it* will leak. Land values are going through the roof around here. You're not the only ones feverishly tracing ownership of every single property, farm and minuscule building plot, and buying up whatever else you can yourself. While there are still swivel eyed climate deniers in parliament, even now, the money's moved on, and is looking to the future. The North is on the radar, possibly for the first time since the industrial revolution. You'll be wanting to secure land for the continuance of government. Also you'll be looking to agriculture. Water capture. Food production. Livestock. France lost 40% of its grain harvest last year, Germany 30%, which puts them ever more beholden to Russia, and the onging calamity that is Ukraine. My assessment, since you ask, is that the big players are ahead of us. And sadly, unless we're prepared to provoke the foreign powers, who already own most of this region now, including its cities, by, say, threatening compulsory purchase, at gunpoint, the game is already lost. And just how many gunboats can we muster now to force them down? And we have no friends in Europe, since we gave them the finger."

"What is the game? Humour me."

"The strategic, long term security, indeed the very *existence* of Albion, in the face of climate catastrophe. This will be all that's left of the breadbasket of Britain, in another half century. Anything south of Brum will be parched, anything south of Watford will be desert, except those parts under water, which will include London and the seat of government. North of here will be too wet for anything except mushrooms. And trade and security cooperation with Europe went for Burton with BREXIT."

"And if it leaks, what then?"

"The press will make a fuss at first, then write what you tell them to. The story will move on. People won't believe it, anyway, or they won't care. Look how docile they took the demise of the health service, which I must admit, I wasn't expecting – their docility, I mean. The demise of the health service was a long time

coming. No, it'll be the backlash in Moscow, Beijing and Rijad, you will need to consider. Then there's our end of the nuclear early warning, relocation of key installations, as dictated by increasingly erratic Washington. I'm just brainstorming here, you understand. You need a team, you need a Foreign Office worth its salt, not a lone old fart who's brains have been fried."

"I have a team," she says. "Or rather I am of such a team. And we're all saying much the same thing as the lone old fart."

"Where does Winona come into this?"

"Who? Oh... her. Clive's mysterious little project. I've really no idea. He was anxious to avoid her falling into the machinery. That's all he told me. As to why, or what constituted the machinery exactly, he did not divulge, though I feel he genuinely feared for her safety."

This doesn't help at all. Then I note she changes tack: "So, you think Elaine might be working for the French?"

"Or the Russians. Or the French, or the Russians are interested in her, or me, or you. I don't know. In my head right now anything is possible, but that's not necessarily what's probable. I told you, I'm really not up to this game any more. Even Winona..."

"What about her?"

"She could easily one of yours. Indeed that's far more likely than what she purports to be, even though I choose to believe what she purports to be more than anything else, if only because we all need some solid ground. And she genuinely does appear to be able to work magic."

"Point taken. But rest assured, the little girl isn't one of ours. Oh dear... look, why don't you come back into the fold. You've clearly not lost your edge. I can set you up in a local office. You can still do some good. There's clearly plenty of fire in your belly. The future is so uncertain, George. Without powerful friends we really are in for rough old ride. And we could still be friends."

"And who would be my line manager?"

"Does it matter?"

"Who would have me field my thousand emails a day? Who would be on my back for my delusional performance targets? Who would be inviting me to meetings to chin-wag the day into night, discussing – I don't know – the minutia of cultural sensitivities, instead of letting me do my job? I'm sorry but the very thought of it makes me feel ill."

"I can protect you from all that."

"No you can't. You work for Singleton, who, as I recall, doesn't know his arse from his elbow, but who, as I also recall, now, has family working the ladders in Whitehall, and is well versed in the Byzantine art of managerialism, and how to clear up a galloping dose of the clap without him becoming a laughing stock. Which is why you and I are sitting out here in the rain talking nonsense, and he's sipping G + T in his old duffer's club."

"All right. Your perspective is duly noted, and possibly shared. But you're not off the hook. I still need you."

"And I'll do what I can. But you do know it's futile."

"So you say."

"So I do say. Tell me, is it true of your kind, you put in place your escape route, before anything else?"

"You've been reading too many novels."

"Well, it's good advice. I got it from an old hand. You may know of him. He controlled networks in China for forty years. Made a mint on the side, then disappeared just before the department knifed him in the back. That he was a magician too, helped enormously, of course. But be careful, Tamara. I missed Clive's funeral, much to my regret. I don't want to be missing yours as well. Think of a way out."

"Thanks, I think. Oh, don't be so morbid, George. Anyway..."

"Anyway?"

"You said it wasn't necessary? The seduction of Ms Dodds, I mean... just how easy was it?"

"I don't wish to discuss it."

"I ask for purely operational reasons."

"In that case, dinner sufficed."

"As easy as that?"

"It would seem so, yes."

"Did you kiss?"

"That's private."

"Oh, George, you didn't manage it did you? How unromantic of you. She deserves better than that. If I'd been told to seduce her, I would have definitely kissed her – a much more pleasant assignment, and I envy you in that respect. Instead I'm banging Sir Josh."

"I know. You said."

"Admittedly, as little as I can get away with... but..."

"Please... spare me the details. I really don't want to know."

"Because you're jealous? Oh, that's so sweet, George."

"Because that you are telling me, like everything else you've told me, tells me there's an operational reason for your doing so. And that worries me. And I'd really rather not know."

She ploughs on, regardless. "He's not very good at it. But I pretend he is. Well, one has to, I suppose. The bigger a man's ego, the easier he is to manipulate, especially through that projection in his trousers, if you'll forgive my metaphors. It's really rather sordid, I know. Forgive me. Men like you though... you're harder. Your ego has either dissolved, or crumbled, or completely caved in. You're more easily seduced by the promise of a bosom to lay your head upon. Yes, that's it. Men like you miss your mothers. That's how I got to you."

"No you didn't, your bosom is far too small for that. You got to me because half of me is afraid of you."

"Really? And the other half?"

"The other half likes you, Amelia, and genuinely wishes you well."

"Oh... but that's so sweet. And you remembered my name."

I think she means this. And that she means this, confuses me. Spies are always deeply conflicted people. And Tamara is not like me. She is not a back-room person, not an analyst. She is a field agent. She is unfathomable. She is like a bottomless lake, reflective of the sky, reflective of anything you want to see in her. But to step in, is surely to drown.

"Which brings me to the question I must ask of you, Tamara, Amelia... and that is... if the worst should come to the worst, I mean for me, you'll do it gently, won't you?"

"Do what?"

"Have me done in, of course."

"Oh... that. I thought we were talking about something else. But, yes, George. Of course. I promise. Either way, and whatever the conclusion to this... this thing... I will be ever so gentle with you."

"And it'll be you that does it? Not those great lumps who follow you around. I'd hate that. I'm sure they're very competent, but..."

"Quite. I understand. And I promise. Indeed, I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm definitely your girl, George... for... well... whatever it is you have in mind."

Chapter Thirty Three

In which we explore the problem with Elaine Dodds, also certain sexual matters and the intrusion of a French dimension into my story which of late has become littered with beginner's phrases. We consider enemies, and attempt to name them, for only by so clearly labelling them does one know whom to smite, whom to set oneself above as the King of Wands! We seek another kind of wisdom, in Milo's weed induced euphoria, and conclude we must lie to Winona in order to protect her. So...

Tamara is right about many things, I'm sure, but about that one thing, in particular, she is *especially* right. Elaine and I did not kiss. How she knows for sure, or if she merely intuited it, both puzzles and impresses me. Clearly, she is more than a razzle dazzle girl, but then I have always known this. It does not worry me, that we did not kiss – Elaine and I, I mean. But there we are. And that's the problem, you see? I mean with me and Elaine Dodds.

And as for where we are, or where we were, Elaine was gently insistent on the way things should proceed, that night, and that way was the Roman way. And in that way, as Aldous Huxley might have put it, Elaine was indeed very pneumatic. Or perhaps that's just my unfortunate misinterpretation and Huxley meant something else by the metaphor.

But that's the thing with metaphors.

Anyway... I had thought myself grown somewhat numb in that department, but the presence of her atop, made light work of any further hesitation on my part. Indeed, I regret, I may have arrived too soon. But if I disappointed her, she was polite enough not to say. Elaine is very... what is the word?... self contained, or rather perhaps the word is more "restrained", in her expectations. We slept a little afterwards, which was indeed pleasant, that sensation of so fragrant a presence in the night. But when I woke, sometime before dawn, she had already returned to her room. And the next time I saw her, as I've told you, was at breakfast, when she was neatly pressed and buttoned up again.

So, no, we did not kiss. And to kiss is important. *Je voudrais t'embrasser,* as I think the French would have it. *I would like kiss to you,* is, among adults at least, a far more intimate statement of wish than, for example: *je voudrais simplement te baiser.* Please excuse my

language. I do not wish to appear pretentious, nor gratuitously profane. I'm merely embarrassed to use the vernacular in my mother tongue, embarrassed to write anything I would not have liked my actual mother to read. And my mother could not read French, you see?

Is Tamara also right about my weakness for a breast to lay my head upon? Again, metaphorically speaking, there may be some mileage in that, traces of a complex still circling the old Jungian Anima. Elaine did not offer hers, nor would she ever, I believe, and I did not seek it. It was an exquisite experience, but also, in retrospect, rather a functional, and impersonal one. As they say, sometimes the first time with anyone, it is best just got out of the way, and you find your depth in the follow ups. Except there is, as yet, no hint of a follow up and it seems neither of us particularly wanted to speak of it. So, we did not bring it home with us, and we carry on at the farm as we have always done, which is somewhat chaste. Unlike Cerise and Milo, one would never know we were lovers, which, of course, we are not. After all: *Une fois ne fait pas un amant.*

All right, all right. I'm puzzled by the sudden intrusion of French here, as much as you are. My head works strangely, as you know. Be patient with me. It will either pass, or explain itself in due course. You have Google Translate to help you through the fog of my modesty.

Now focus! No, not you. Me!

Who are your enemies, George? And when will you begin acting like the King of Wands? When will you be in full possession of yourself, and the devil to your enemies?

But first, what is story of the wands?

Well, to be sure, it is the A to Z of inspiration, of creativity, of life itself.

I refer you to the Rider, Waite, Colman-Smith picture cards: on the king's throne, and on his robes we have salamanders. The salamander is a symbol of the fire of creation, indeed it is a thing born of fire, but these salamanders are also formed into an ouroboros, this being a symbol of the unity of the material and the spiritual realms, each giving birth to, and yet also consuming itself. All of this strikes me as terribly arcane.

Are my enemies merely the faceless villains come to steal the earth from under my feet? The more McGuffinous part of my

narrative would have you believe so, but if you've been following my psyche carefully, you would also note I don't care one way or the other. They are only my enemies if I choose to make them so and, since I do not, they are merely ridiculous to me.

The tree has already fallen. No one saw it, and I have let it go. I have let my father's house go. I have gifted it to the pebble eyed men who hunt and kill with dogs. This is a sacrifice in the old, authentic sense of the word. We let something precious go, in order to appease the gathering storm, this storm of barbarism. But I can't save you from it, too. You must make your own provision. I can only save myself, and those around me, whom I choose to save.

Do you think, Winona is the only magician here?

So, the King leads. But where are his people? Who are *my* people?

Too much, too much, George. You are stretching it to breaking point. The card was a dud!

So, evening now, and cleaning up, after another dinner with Cerise and Milo.

I do enjoy these shared meals with the youngsters, but these, too, are coming to an end. Milo has now found himself a place at the University of Cologne. He begins in September. Cerise is waiting on news of her Irish passport. When that comes through, she will travel to be with him, work casually for a while, then also resume her studies, in Germany. Life for the young is terribly complicated these days. But youth is ingenious, and always finds a way around the turgid stupidity of its elders.

Elaine, as usual, is away for the weekend, visiting her mother.

"But what will you do, George?"

Cerise is sweetly, and genuinely, afraid for me, thinks me somewhat confused, vulnerable, perhaps, that I may end up hoodwinked by scammers, if left to my own devices, lose my life savings, and end up on the street. My, how old Albion has changed since the days of Marsh Avenue, and Mr Williams, and his Voigtländer!

We are drying dishes. Milo seemed preoccupied throughout dinner, and has slunk a little way onto the moor to smoke. He would not embarrass Jasmine by lighting up anywhere near the farm. Meanwhile Cerise plays the concerned daughter, which I enjoy, and appreciate.

"Oh, I shall be fine, Cerise. I shall go and live on my boat for a

while."

She gives me a look as if to say she does not think that sounds like a sensible thing for a man of my years, what with autumn coming on. But she could not possibly actually say it.

"Really, it's quite cosy, you know. And what with the cost of energy these days, and its indifferent reliability, my little boat with its wood burner is probably one of the warmest places in the whole of England, and still capable of charging my devices as well, which is really all a man needs."

No, the humour isn't working. Distract her with something else, George: "Is Milo all right?"

She nods, somewhat terse, dismissive. Ah. They have had a tiff, then.

News of the farm has come as a disappointment to all of us. I have only been here a few months, so it is not as unsettling. But this is how we are to live now, never more than a heartbeat from repeated domicide, at the whim of the rentier who warms his backside on the bonfire of our labours. And it must be terrible for Jasmine, whose family has farmed here for centuries. This place is in her blood. Wherever she goes from here, no matter how pleasant, and no matter the brave face and the stoicism of the hill farmer, the trauma will cut deep. Can she not be one of your people, George?

Well of course she is, but how am I to protect her? After all, money talks, and must be listened to, or it will hurt you.

"What will they do with it, do you think?" she asks.

"Who? What?"

"This rich man who wants the farm? Where did he come from George? What does he want? I don't get it. It's pleasant here in summer, but in winter it's so cold and miserably wet, and the wind cuts you in half. I can't imagine it will suit a rich man, living out here. It is not really a place for Rolls Royces."

"That's true. But I don't suppose he'll be here much at all, really. And then can any of us imagine the climate in another few decades? It may be like the Mediterranean. We may be growing olives. The seat of government may have moved to Manchester, and gold-plated super-cars will be drag-racing along the M6 from Preston to Lancaster. So, the thought of a former home-counties oligarch living in a converted Lancashire long-house, is perhaps not so strange."

I have found the right humour button, and she laughs, though I

am not entirely joking. I saw the study-papers, oh... years ago now, regarding possible future trends in British agronomy, and political administration, the jockeying between Birmingham and Manchester as the seat of the nation, post 2100, or possibly sooner. And the rich must race their super-cars somewhere, for what else is the point of them? The super cars, I mean. The rich have no purpose, if they do not spend their money with a mind to the greater good.

"Maybe then at last, they'll fix our trains, George?"

"Ah, indeed they might." Except we shall have no need of them by then.

She sniffs, dismissive again, pushing the world away. We have touched a nerve. "But what will we be doing in that future you describe? Or my children? I'll tell you what we'll be doing: cleaning rich men's toilets, while the prettiest of us are taken to rich men's beds as toys, and ruined, like it was in olden times."

Ah... So Cerise is with child. That explains a lot.

Her phone buzzes, she picks it up and begins to scroll. She spoke for a moment there as if she expected a revolution. She is mistaken. The English proletariat have swelled their numbers, post 2020, but their forebears have proven time and again their willingness to suffer any privation and to carry the top-hatted cheerily upon their backs. Revolution is a threat the Service ceased to worry about a long time ago. I leave her to her scrolling, and go in search of Milo.

He is hidden, hunkered down behind a ruin of drystone wall. I find him by following the smell of weed. He offers me a puff. I decline. Heaven knows what effect that would have on my fried brain. I'd rather not find out, preferring the brief highs, and the longer sedative effects of red wine, or malt whisky, or meditation. After a little circumlocutory questioning, I discover he's been leaned on by the immigration wombles again. Contrary to our international reputation, we are a kind and generous people. But we are also vulnerable to the rise of cruel leadership, be they office managers, business leaders, ministers of state, or the chieftains of police.

Apologies. I digress.

I wish I could help him, use some contacts to get *les connards* to lay off, but I wouldn't know where to start, now, and anyway that would simply be another form of corruption, of which there is too much these days. And I feel he's better completing his studies in Germany. Europe has potential, still. Provided Russia leaves it alone.

"So, Milo, how far gone is Cerise?"

"Gone?"

"With child. Pregnant. How long?"

"You *know* about that? She told you?"

"I guessed. Congratulations. You'll be a wonderful father."

He's not so sure, not sure about many things, and struggles to smile through his anxieties, which isn't at all like him.

"That's if Cerise will come out and settle with me... and maybe if she doesn't get her passport... that will not be possible."

"There are other ways, Milo. And what makes you think she won't come?"

He shrugs, sighs. Yes, it's all very complicated.

"But of course she will. She's clearly in love with you. And, naturally, she'll want what's best for her child. And that's with you. In Germany."

"You think?"

"Absolutely, old boy." *did I just say 'old boy'?* "Look, Milo, you're a good man. I have this book, you know, and in it I write the names of everyone I've ever met. It's divided into sections for those I thought were bad, and those I thought were good, and who pretended to be good, but were bad, and who pretended to be bad, but were good... and then there were the don't knows, of course. There are lots of those. It's a thick book, now, mostly full of the names of the bad, and the pretenders, and the don't knows. Of the truly good there's but one page, sadly. Rest assured, you are on it. Cerise also. And Jasmine. And a young lady of my acquaintance, called Winona. There are one or two others who are dead now... and others I'm reserving judgement on."

Milo tips back his head, and smiles. The weed is beginning to work on him. He is gentle when stoned, as he is when he is not. "You made that up," he says. "About the book. But you had me going. I think there are more good people in your life than will fill a single page, George. But I take your point, and thank you, but as for myself, I am more of a don't know."

"All right, I made the book up. But if I did have one, you'd still be on the good page."

"And you, George? What page would you put yourself on?"

"Oh... we're all capable of bad things. It's whether we do them intentionally or not and if we enjoy doing them, that makes the difference."

"And who is Winona? I have not heard you speak this name before. She is your girlfriend?"

"She is a girl, and she is a friend. But girlfriend? No. I do love her, though. She is special, I think. She is the daughter I would have wished for, had I ever slowed down long enough to be in your shoes. Does that sound strange to you?"

"No, it sounds cute. Can you not adopt her? Except, I suppose her parents might object. How does one adopt an adult daughter? Does one propose? Get down on one knee and say: *will you be my daughter, Winona*?"

Milo is definitely high now. I decide to play with him. Sometimes there is wisdom spoken in drunkenness. The trick is remembering what you said the morning after.

"She never knew her parents. And she's too old for me to adopt. I've already made enquiries about that. Anyway, I suspect she can manage very well on her own. Except..."

"Oh?..."

"I wonder. She's a witch and a mathematician. And a savant. But she's been working jobs at the bottom of the food chain –sixty, seventy hours a week – and all of her earnings gone in rent. That was until she was evicted and fired, and now she's homeless, or she would be if she wasn't living on my boat and I'd not invented the job of her bringing my boat up North. But when she gets here, what's to be done with her, Milo?"

"Done? Why do anything? This is already good thing you are doing, George."

"But it comes to an end, doesn't it? Like everything comes to an end, and often sooner than we think, or hope. If she was my daughter, it wouldn't be a problem. We would have blood to connect us and she would always be protected. But she's not, and we don't, so I can't."

"As a lover then? You say she is too old to adopt. How old? You would be surprised these days, George."

"Oh... even taking into account the most liberal of contemporary mores, sadly, she's still not old enough. Or rather, I am still too old, and getting older by the minute. The age difference is somewhat of a barrier, trust me. And I never understood wealthy old men taking young women to their beds. The thought of it is, frankly, revolting to me, to say nothing of exhausting, and, trust me, the mind moves on as we age."

"Really? It does? I hope not. You sure you don't want a puff?"

"Thank you, no. I'm not sure the rather brittle conduits of my brain could withstand the active compounds in marijuana."

"Savant, you said? What is that?"

"She can add, subtract, multiply and divide numbers in her head, instantly, no matter how big. Decimals too. Square roots, cubes, you name it. And she doesn't know how she does it."

"Wow... it sounds as if she is not of this world, George. And certainly not for it, such as the world is right now."

"Not *for* it?"

"I mean a mind like that? These are rare examples of humanity. They point the way to the most extraordinary of possibilities. But we prefer to ignore them, or to pathologize them, call them liars, charlatans, humiliate them. Perhaps they don't fit in, you know? So then we demonise them. But truly, I think they are a way forward for us. More than this... all of this was a con, George. This way of life we are sold, I mean. You must look after her. See to it that if she marries, she marries well. And I mean not to some dick-head who will beat her for being smarter than he is. As for the world as it is now, it doesn't care how smart she is. Look on your phone. All it wants to know is the colour of her underwear – forgive me. Tell her from me to keep herself well hidden, to work her magic in secret and fuck the world. As it is, it is not worthy of her making her presence known in it."

"Ah... alas, I believe you speak the truth, Milo."

Indeed, he does. The world as it has grown, is not worthy of Winona, or him for that matter

When I return to my room, I find the power to the farm has been cut. There is no need to panic. This is not the precursor to a special forces raid. It is merely a product of the decrepitude of our generating capacity, and a long period of insufficient wind to prop it up. I am prepared with a candle, and a jar to amplify it. Thus we draw on our pre-electrical history, and pull a blanket over our shoulders for warmth. As for the present, the laptop is already charged – I make a habit of it now. The power often fails in the early evening, a time of peak demand. So, I open it up, and settle down to think, though on what I do not know.

Milo is right, I had better divert Winona. Make up a bull and cock story, about being unable to get the Lady Lucy booked into the Middleton marina for blacking. Have her scoot on through, perhaps

all the way to Ripon. Send her up the cut on the boat, meet her there, or accompany her there. That will occupy her into the autumn. Except, of course, this is no ordinary being we're talking of, and she will know I'm lying.

Chapter Thirty Four

The King of Swords, and the Devil upside down

In which I return to the Lady Lucy to find Winona settled into the cultural milieu of the canal. I try to elicit clues from her as to the reason for Clive's interest in her. She can think of none. I propose becoming her father, she counter-proposes I become her guru instead, a position I am not at all happy with, but it seems to please her, so I resolve to pretend, all the while knowing I shall learn infinitely more from her than she from me. I ask her to read for me, and to steer the boat a few days closer to home. So...

"Why are you lying, George?" She does not say this angrily.

Truth, George: "Because I'm afraid for you, and I want to keep you safe. I would like you to stay hidden on the boat for a while longer, until I understand the risk better. This, I think, is my purpose in lying to you."

"Then why not just say so?"

Well, go on George. Answer that without embarrassment, or confusion. Okay:

"Because, there's also a feeling of having imprisoned you in this weird canal sub-culture, without adequate explanation. And you should feel free to walk away any time. Yet, I fear to let you do that, because you have become very precious to me."

"Oh, but that's so sweet. If only I were twenty years older, I would marry you – if you ever got around to asking me, that is."

She's teasing, George.

"You're being kind, now. It's nearer thirty years, I think. And I would, indeed... ask, for truly, I do love you. But alas, as things are... I suppose I must make do with acting as your father – I mean in the absence of anyone else willing to own up to it."

Ooh, George, are you sure?

Yes, absolutely.

"But if you were my father I'd have to hex you, because it would be your fault I began life as a foundling, in a shoebox, instead of living a nice middle class life... or something. Though I suppose I should hex my mother too while I'm at it."

All right... sharp come back. Think quick now, George,...

"Good point. I mean... then I should be your father, in a *spiritual* sense. Or as in... from another life, perhaps?... do you think?"

"Oooh... stretching it a bit now... but, okay. Not much of a daughter though, am I? Sponging off you like this. Or perhaps that's what daughters do, do you think? No, sorry. You are more than my father, George. You are my Guru. Yes, that's it! I shall call you Sifu. You tell such wonderful stories, and you make sense of things. This is all very weird. But, you and I? We deal with what is weird. If we're talking other lives, then we'd be of an age, and lovers, surely? You have a problem with sex. I sense that. Let it be the tension, the energy that drives us. In this life then... yes, you are my Guru, and I am your adept. No, shut up... accept your place, Sifu."

"All right, but you must respect the fact that a part of me worries you are also making fun of me."

She grows serious. "I would never do that. The adept always knows when they have something to learn, and who they can learn it from."

"All right. But... about Middleton... and Durleston Wood, and the meadow and the property development, I'm sorry, but I really don't know the extent of the threat, nor why you should even be considered a threat. Tell me, did you ever meet a man called Clive Martland? Oldish gentleman, well spoken. You might have served him in the cafe, and he took an interest in you..."

"An interest, George?"

"Above and beyond what you would consider normal."

"The only man of that description would be you." She senses her answers do nothing to help. "I'm sorry. I really wish I knew. Who is he, this Clive Martland?"

"Oh... an old ghost. And whatever he knew he did not intend me finding out. But I shall try. In the meantime, if you could just... have patience and keep a low profile."

"All right, I'll stay low. I'll cruise through Middleton unseen, in the dark. I'll cruise up to Yorkshire, while there's still enough sunshine to charge this beautiful boat. Then I'll lay up while the canal freezes over, until Spring. Or we could moor up here. It's quite a pretty stretch."

"Long time since the canals froze over."

"You know what I mean. Oh, George, I'd happily take the Lady Lucy to the moon if you wanted me to. And it's not just because you're paying me. I love this sub-culture. There's something about people who are drawn to canals, drawn to water-sides. The dog walkers, the fisher-folk. I've been doing readings, you know?

Whenever I moor up for a bit, I put a sign in the window. Funny how no one will admit how much they want to believe in magic. It's like they daren't. But I don't know if they believe in it really, or if they just want to talk. I've learned all sorts. Mostly about how much people suffered during the plague, and how they fear for the climate, and their kids, and the next plague, and how the fish are dying, and the honey bees, and how they can no longer afford to heat their homes, and how did it ever come to this? Sorry... rabbiting on a bit. Anyway, never mind that. The most important thing is always the present moment, and concerning that – the present moment, I mean – it's really good to see you, George."

"And you, Winona." Indeed it is, but it strikes me that if she is making it more widely known she has skills of the esoteric variety, it makes it easier for anyone skilled with questions to track her down.

"What is it, George?"

"Change your hair. Keep your ears covered at all times, and change your name when giving it to others."

"All right."

The season is growing brittle now. The air is cooling with a hint of autumn, the first touch of it in the colours of the canal-side scrubbery. We are jacketed and hatted as we sit out in the well deck, with the ceremony of the tea. Yes, the English ceremony. It is hardly Zen, but then, decent as we are, mostly, we are not yet a Zen people. We are still *people* though, still possessed of souls looking for direction, for meaning. While we talk, the light fades into the short of evening. I light a lantern, and ask if she will read for me. She draws the Devil upside down, and the two of wands.

"Odd," she says. " I checked the deck for upside-downies. Yet there he is, or isn't. Old Nick himself. But this is a good sign, Sifu. The non-material realm, and the two of wands, your personal power, your originality. Always good to see that in a guru."

Then she draws the third card. The King of Swords.

In her method, the first pair suggests the overall milieu in which we operate. The final card is what we bring to bear, or *should* bring to bear, or *might* bring to bear, if only we had the sense to do so.

"Oh, but this is so *you*, Sifu. The Sword King is intellectual, he is analytical. He does the right thing. And people listen to him."

"Then it’s another dud. No one ever listens to me, Winona. I spent my entire career compiling intricate intelligence reports that

no one ever read."

"So you might think. But that is simply your modesty, Sifu. I listen to you, or I wouldn't be here, would I? The people who matter to you, listen to you. Those who don't listen to you, don't matter."

"I am not the King of Swords."

"Yes you are. From what you've told me about your life, your *secret* life, that's exactly what you are."

"Analyst, yes. I suppose. All right, I am the King of Swords. Or I might have been, or I might once have aspired to be. Now, I'm not so sure. I'm not much of a swordsman any more."

"You only think that because you're using the other side of your head these days. And you hesitate to trust it."

"Because that side of my head is not so skilled as yours. It’s you who should be my sifu, Winona."

"Lucky we met, then."

It's true, I am lucky, and I feel it, deeply. Then she asks what she can do to help. I ask if she will cruise up the cut for a day or two, while I lie in the bunk and rest, feeling the motion of the boat, and consider our options. By this I mean I need to meditate, but she already knows what I mean.

"Yes, of course," she says, "I can do that for you, and gladly."

Chapter Thirty Five

Thaumaturgy

In which we explore themes of betrayal, escape and lies. We discuss visions of the ground of being, and what to do with them. We discuss Elaine, and consider more carefully if she is the route a man needs to escape the wilderness of his later life, and if not, why not? And we learn I should be more careful with knives, unless Winona is around to heal the wounds. So...

I betrayed my country, once, or perhaps "defied" is a better word. But that's another secret, one I should not be telling, though I don't suppose it matters, now. The bare outline of that particular story is how I prevented a guru of my own from being sacrificed on the altar of diplomatic expedience. In other words, it would have suited my country for a good man to have been betrayed, and most likely killed. Although employed by the service at a senior level, he was not English born, nor by then of any particular use, and thus expendable. I caught wind of it, and tipped him off.

Perhaps you think it was a reckless thing to have done, but I did not like my fellow office monkeys at the time. They were of a very particular cadre, stupendously vacuous, yet to the manor born, so to speak. Such characters make the grade by virtue of putting on a good show, layered with oodles of charm and self confidence, when underneath is rot. They are generally a bad sort, lacking in genuine feeling, which I suspect is beaten out of them at the schools they attend.

All of this was in contrast to my teacher, native of a former Soviet Republic, who, in my estimation, was an admirable type. Indeed, I thought him a brave and honourable man, a man of rare intelligence, though, like all spies, he was somewhat conflicted and, at times, deeply strange. But he had taken a shine to me, if only I suspect because, in my lowly position, I did not threaten him, and might yet be useful to him, as indeed turned out to be the case. But for his part of the unspoken bargain, he took me deeper into various overseas societies, and, under the wing of his protection, I learned much regarding the machinery of international relations, which, at its best is of exquisite nuance. And at its worst –well – pretty much what we have now.

Concerning more practical matters, he taught me how to shoot,

how to strip and reassemble that rather cumbersome 9mm Browning, blindfolded. And he persuaded me that even a man in my middling position should always have an escape route, one known only to himself. This was in case his fellows failed him, either by incompetence or design. Anyway, my tip-off bought him time enough to indemnify himself, and retreat, rather than spend the rest of his days in a foreign prison, or more likely be executed. His network too would have been rolled up and likewise dispatched by various means spectacularly foul. The ragged end of international affairs is not so glamorous, is it? Other nations live and command as they see fit, while Albion makes what accommodations it must, as do we, who serve in her. We shall meet up with my friend shortly, I hope, for I am badly in need of his counsel.

These are just some of the details of a former life and times. *And what larks, eh, Pip? What Larks!* Do I quote Dickens? I believe I do. God bless the man, but I could never bear the social darkness of his literature. I mention this only to remind you there is a harshness to the world, not that I'm sure you need reminding. We – *I mean my kind* – would tell ourselves we prevented much nastiness from washing up on Albion's shore, prevented it from troubling the sleeping heads of babes, and other innocents. But of course the babes and innocents now have other problems, like finding the coin for their gas meters. And we only ever protected the rich.

Funny the things that come back to me, as the Lady Lucy parts the waves. There is just the faintest hum from the motor, barely audible above the gentler wash of her wake. Technology, eh? I lie easy in the bunk, the round cushion pressed into the porthole to cover up the view of the bank, whose relative motion I would otherwise find a little dizzying. Winona stands at the tiller, eyes ahead, steering a steady course, while I reminisce, and meditate, but mostly... reminisce.

I have lied to her before, of course, and I regret it now. She once asked me about a vision I had, and I don't know why, but I told her I had felt my awakening in a dour little flat over a chip-shop, in Harpenden. I had wished to convey the idea that even the ordinariness of the every day is but a heartbeat from the magical. The truth of the matter is I was among mountains, actually, crossing Striding Edge to Helvellyn in a dawn light, first slice of sun peeping through. The wind was drawing long trails of mist from the leeward

face of the hill. It was altogether a moment of great beauty, a moment to haunt all those who crave the mountains, and have them seeking such company all their lives. But once in a while, it triggers something, and you break through the shell that contains you. You do not simply see the mist, you *become* the mist, you become mountain as the light strokes it, and you become the light. And more, there is a presence, and it says *yes*, this is how it is, you've always known it, but simply forgotten. And then you brace yourself against it, because it can't be right, can it? Then there's a ripple of doubt, and it delivers you back to this bag of bones, dealing with what arises, and worrying yourself over what you cannot alter.

What do you learn from that?

Well, we should try to stop worrying about what we cannot alter, for a start, and accept the possibility that, even though we find it impossible to believe in the vision, it might just be true anyway. Because if it is... well, that's you sorted at least. It's just a pity about everyone else, like maggots in an open wound, feasting on the pus of their endless and largely self created suffering, and knowing no different.

But of more down to earth matters...

My, how the mind drifts today... forgive me.

I should speak to Elaine!

The memory of our night together comes back to me as a patchwork quilt, one piece at a time, and all of it delightfully soft to touch. It's hard to judge these things at my age, I mean, against the weight of one's history. But I'm coming to the conclusion it was one of the more remarkable events of my life, and were she simply an Elaine Dodds, I might have found great pleasure in it. She might have been just the escape route a man needed to flee the wilderness of his later life. Here, I would say to the universe... *this is a very fine thing indeed, more of this please, more of this for everyone*. Except she is not just an Elaine Dodds, is she? To what extent she is something else, I'm sure will be revealed, but for now, best just to let it all lie, eh George?

French? Maybe. Russian? The violence of the Russian state is, of course, very good at teaching us to be terrified of it.

I wish Winona would not call me Sifu.

Why?

Because, I think she means it. And what have I to teach her? Other

than, don't be like me, Winona.

Oh, all right. I'm a long way from being dead. It's just that I feel so ancient at times. But I have another twenty five years of living, fate willing, and I must find some use for it. What am I to make of all the mess I have left behind, professionally? I mean, as if it's anything to do with me. What to make of the mess I keep stepping in, in spite of my best efforts to avoid it?

Meanwhile, the world turns.

Albion has lost its way, is irrelevant on the world's stage, one clown car of a government after the other. But one small patch of it might still be of use in a climate ravaged world for the nurturing of rich men, and their potatoes. But it still seems a silly thing to be fighting over. It seems indeed a silly subject for the great game to turn its mind to, and all the sinister players, in their swagger, to be swarming around this sorry patch of earth, towards which the Lady Lucy is still sailing, I mean for want of other options.

In other ways it's an idyllic time. We cruise, I meditate. We break at midday for lunch. I help out with any work at the locks. We moor by night, and I find there is something profound about tapping in the mooring pins and checking the lines. We light the lanterns, back up the stove for the night, discuss fuel and provisioning. Winona reads the cards. Then, around nine, she retires forward, draws the curtains for her privacy.

The only incident of note is when I am peeling carrots, and gash the heel of my palm with the vegetable knife. Before I have reacted, and even before the gash has had chance to wake up, and sense its freedom to bleed, Winona has taken my hand in hers and pressed her palm against it, eyes closed. She holds it for a long time and I feel a burning which I take to be on account of the wounding, except it is rather a muted sensation, and possesses gradually a quality of comfort, of healing. Indeed, when she lets my hand go, the thing is half healed already, and not bleeding. I flex the palm speculatively,...

"You should be more careful with knives, George," she says.

Astonished gratitude is forming on my lips, but she erases it with a look, and more... something in her demeanour tells me we shall not speak of it, ever. She cannot help what she does, and sometimes it frightens her. I suppose what I'm getting at, and perhaps over-egging a little, is that one cannot spend long in the company of Winona, without a reminder there is something

extraordinary, and authentically superhuman, about her. Or rather she is more fully human than the rest of us. She has evolved, and rather wishes she had not, because to be the first, and without Ego, is always a lonely place to be.

I think back to the evening with Clive, at the country pile of Sir Joshua, that memorable soiree of the unwholesome. And Clive, of The Service, bobbing about in its malodorous wash, his finger on the launch of torpedoes. I was to explain my presence in the field of operations. I was to convince him of the lack of conspiracy between myself and this girl, for that was one story he suspected. And having scotched that story, I was to pull her out, and protect her, because that made it a different story, now, and Clive was always quick at thinking on his feet.

He always knew more than he let on, too. It is the nature of our profession and the cardinal rule of intelligence that, at least when dealing with superiors who are also incompetents, we should always hold something in reserve, because the more you supply, the more will be asked. It's as well then to have the answers to those questions ready, but bide one's time with them, file them for later use. Alas, as concerns Winona, Clive took those answers with him, and worse, thought me too incompetent to be entrusted with them.

Chapter Thirty Six

Emptiness

In which we consider the counsel of not mistaking the finger for the moon, the counsel of Emptiness, of no thing-ness. We raise our glass to a skull, and we seek the counsel of the most dangerous man in England. We talk of magicians, and mystics. And we talk of killing. So...

Before you can grasp The Secret you must grasp the concept that there is a dimension of consciousness we are unaware of. Indeed, it is conditioned by society, which does not equip us to recognise it. It is not that we do not already possess it, then, only that we overlook it. It is a kind of filtering of information, for our own safety, like blinkers put upon a skittish horse. Remove the blinkers and we are exposed to such a wide spectrum of being, we would go mad, or be held in a state of catatonic shock, while the sabre toothed tigers came along and made a meal of us. It's about evolution, you see? But things are different now. We are a species evolved to the point we are capable of shaping the planet. Now we no longer fear the sabre toothed tiger, so there is room for letting a little more of the light of consciousness in. But still, something prevents it.

I believe it is fear. Most of us do not want it, for it puts us in a lonely place.

We have our religions. They speak of other worlds, of great secrets, of transcendent states of mind. The more enlightened observers tell us religions are like signposts pointing towards the Secret but, in themselves, they are not *it* and can be somewhat distracting to the unwary or the merely naive. Like they say of Zen, they are a finger pointing at the moon. But one should not mistake the finger for the moon, or, like Magritte's painting of a pipe, with the caption, *"Ceci n'est pas une pipe."*

In other words, we should not mistake the image for the real thing.

Religions are words, they are stories, and it's tempting to mistake the words, the stories, for the territory. It's easy to fall down and worship the words, to make an idol of them, of Heaven, of Paradise, of the Lord God Almighty. In Buddhism, the word is emptiness, which is more useful, to my mind, as it is not a word describing a thing. Rather it points to a "no" thing, and how can one worship no thing? If we worship some thing we must also give rise

to ideas of space and time, for how else can some thing be defined? But these are unnecessary concepts for a no thing, which has no existence, as such, at least not in spatio-temporal terms. Ergo, nothing exists, which is the only way anything can be seen to exist at all.

I have said that before somewhere. Forgive me if I repeat myself.

I'm losing you, I know, and it's simpler than it sounds – the Secret, I mean – once we've made that journey. And then we just kind-of get it, once we've put in our time at the wheel, so to speak. But how do we get there? In what direction do the signposts point? Well, they point at you. The spacelessness, the timelessness, the emptiness, the no-thingness, it's inside of you, inside your head, at least in so far as we assume it's that thing in your head that connects your corporeal form to your consciousness. But this emptiness is not really no thing, rather it is no word. Like the Daoists say: *the way that can be named is not the true way*. And so the emptiness that can be described is not the true emptiness. The secret lies in the nameless, it lies in the un-manifest. Think in those terms and you're on the right track, but as soon as you open your mouth, you're done.

Let's open our mouths then, and talk of the Magician.

Mankind has a foot in both camps, one in the so called material world, and one in the nameless, the formless, the un-manifest, the All-that-is. The man who knows this, is either a magician or a mystic. Fortunately most don't know it, or we'd be in trouble. Mystics are by and large harmless fellows, while magicians are not. What is a magician, you ask? Well, among other things, he is one who can make others see what they might otherwise not. He can make them feel what they might not want to feel. He can manifest in the minds of others what is not actually there, yet make it seem real enough. And he can take what you think is real, and make it disappear. Others describe magicians as merely pathologically extroverted, and insane, and to be sure this nails the surface appearance of things, while missing the point entirely. So, having said all that, let me introduce you to a magician.

We have left Winona on the boat, moored in a pretty little spot in Cheshire. She now calls herself Sharon, and has tattooed the backs of her hands with henna, so if she meets people, if she reads for them, they will identify her by striking characteristics that can easily be erased. Camouflage of any sort is all about confusion of

the senses. Meanwhile we are here, you and I, that is, in the lost little village of Winkley, a rural district, to the north of Bolton. Further, we are entering the Noden Arms, a sixteenth century inn, on the line of a Roman road.

They keep a weathered brown skull here, of uncertain provenance. It sits in a glass case behind the bar and is most likely of the civil war period, though whether roundhead or cavalier, or neither, it depends on the story, of which there are several. But all stories agree any attempt to move it will raise a storm of poltergeist activity. And even though no one believes in that sort of thing any more, the skull remains where it is, its sightless sockets presiding over the optic glasses.

And here am I, one George Swift, looking around the bar, looking for answers, at what he supposes is approximately the halfway point of his own story. He's looking for the hook that will bend the arc of his narrative back towards some sort of grounded conclusion. All of which brings him to this meeting with what might once have been considered the most dangerous man in England: Nikolas Crowne – Nikki to his few surviving friends.

Mage, Occultist, Alchemist, and Mason of the thirty third degree – indeed yes, there is such a species! And yes, he is pathologically extroverted, once branded insane, yet remains stubbornly functional. He is also a former spymaster, and service colleague. By "dangerous" here, we mean in the disruptively magical, Crowleyesque sense of the word, though Nikki never deliberately courted the diabolic. There are no magicians like this any more, which is a shame, and tells me the world has become too mealy mouthed for its own good.

A small man, approaching seventy years, he is inappropriately dark haired, with a little pointy beard and an ominous twinkle which he once told me he practices in the mirror. He wears a three piece suit of a crushed velveteen – green with a purple waistcoat – and a pocket-watch. He carries a foppish, silver-topped cane, upon which he rests his be-silvered fingers, as he sits here in a shaded corner-booth, watching. Were he a smaller man, he would pass for a leprechaun. Most spies are forgettable, but Nikki never played it that way.

"They know what you are, George," he once counselled me. "No sense pretending they don't."

Ordinarily he would be treated as rather a queer fish by the

locals, who hereabouts tend to be insular, but Nikki smooths his way by generosity at the bar, and a charming gift of the gab.

"George, old boy."

"Hello, Nikki."

He is drinking whisky. I offer him the same again, to which he consults his pocket-watch, then nods. It is not that he is pressed for time. He is merely pacing his intake. I order from the bar, raise my own glass briefly to the skull. He was a casualty of dark times, political turmoil and social polarisation, came down on the wrong side of it. He's called George, too, by the way... the skull, I mean. He probably didn't think it could happen, never saw it coming, but then you never do, even if it's staring you in the face.

"Thank you for seeing me, Nikki."

"Nonsense, George. I'm always available to my friends. That is, if they have the wherewithal to find me."

I know. It sounds like a spy story again doesn't it? But that's just my way of teasing you. You want it to be a spy story because we like mystery and intrigue, even when it turns dark and murderous, or perhaps *especially* when it turns dark and murderous. But remember, I am trying to lift your eyes above the usual milieu, to make a joke of what the breathless news anchors, and other peddlers of propaganda preach to us, and with such faux earnestness.

Nikolas and I have seen it all, and more, and it's not like you think, not like it's served to you. The skull knows this too. The skull, like us, has seen it all. It knows everything. It knows what's coming, and you're not going to like it, but the generations that follow us will adapt. And, who knows? Something good may yet come of it.

We are not alike Nikolas, and I. I am a mystic, and somewhat reserved. He is a magician, or he was, and can appear at times somewhat garrulous, and ostentatious, though in a cunning sort of way, a way that draws you out and has you making inappropriate confessions which he will remember word for word. That said, we are both of us on the same trail, in search of the Secret. But the mystic seeks it for its own sake, and because it beckons to him, while the magician seeks it for its power and what might be done with it.

In both cases it is a search conducted by methods considered unconventional, or even silly. In Nikki's case, I speak of things like ritual magic, and alchemy. It went wrong for him when his rituals

raised mischievous psychical entities that dragged him to the edge of madness. He found the cure in alcohol, in maintaining himself at a level of mild but permanent inebriation – which is not to say this affects his judgement, though The Service begged to differ.

We open with casual remarks on the state of the world, as one comments on the weather, and we reminisce on how things came to be this way, and on our own dubious parts in it. But we're not really interested in the current geopolitical twists, nor what madmen, nor what charmingly vicious schoolboys, are currently occupying positions of power. Nor are we concerned for global warming, or the threat of renewed military Armageddon.

It is Nikki who eventually cuts to it:

"So, tell me, George, is the service leaning on you?"

"A bit. But I don't believe my enquiry has anything to do with that. Not directly anyway. There's an intrigue developing over ownership of land in the north – strategic interests and all that, I mean in the light of climate change. They had me seduce a solicitor's clerk for information, whom I lately suspect of being possibly already in the employ of the French... the interests of the French, in said matters, being as yet undetermined."

"My, that sounds like a fascinating little conspiracy. Attractive woman is she, this clerk? It *is* a woman, I presume."

"Oh yes. Indeed. And under other circumstances our acquaintance would be a pleasure... but... well..."

He drains his original glass, lines up his fresh one, checks his watch. It is of the high-accuracy quartz technology, in a faux antiquated case. It is typical of the man, old fashioned in appearance but, under the covers, so to speak, bang up to date, and capable of navigating his way across the universe if need be.

"You're wearing silver, Nikki?"

"Silver, you say?"

"Sorry, an observation. Your rings and such... the watch, the cane top. All of them are silver. I remember you were mostly for gold, I mean in the old days."

"Ah, yes. An astute observation. But I realised I was too much in the sun. Now, I am strictly for the moon."

"Does that help, at all?"

"It does indeed."

"Then perhaps we should be drinking gin."

A gentle laugh. Something of the old Nikolas.

"You saved my life, George, and the lives of countless good men, who were also, paradoxically, traitors to their own flag, but such is life. We choose our loyalties and prove our honour by how fast we stick to them. Now, what can I do for you?"

"It concerns Clive Martland."

He darkens. It's likely Clive signed off on Nikki's betrayal, and Nikki knows this to be so. But knowing Clive, he did not altogether approve of it. And Nikki knows this also.

"So, how is the old bastard?"

"Dead, I'm told."

"Really? This is news. I had not heard that. But who was it did the telling? I mean to you. From what mysterious vine of grapes did this news drip into your ears?"

"The service. A woman who calls herself Tamara."

"And she's the one leaning on you?"

"She's the point of contact, yes."

"So... define a Tamara for me."

"Flapper girl, faux posh meets angel of death. If she didn't look so much like a spy, it would be obvious she was a spy."

Nikolas nods approvingly. "Sounds like a girl very much after my own heart. Go on."

"She had me roped in as her escort one evening, but that was to put me within Clive's circle, so he could growl at me. They suspected I was running a counter operation, I mean my popping up in the middle of their theatre, so to speak, in spite of the fact that such a thing was entirely beyond my competence. But I just happened to be living there. Having satisfied him on that score, he had me take someone under my wing. Not a player, as such... not to my knowledge anyway, more she has the potential to become collateral damage. An unusual girl. A girl of ability, as you would say. Remove her from the scene of the action, keep her safe, says Clive, but from whom, or indeed for why, he didn't let on. I know Clive was a magician too, that you and he didn't get on..."

Nikki objects, dismisses the idea with a wave of his fingers. "He was strictly ceremonial. That lodge of his... they would play dress up and pretend, like all the others do these days. They repeat the rites by rote, scare the novice with them, focus the mind, but they don't really believe in these things any more. Now, tell me more about the girl."

"There's something mythical about her. Without meeting her

you'd think she was just a kid playing at witchcraft, but there's a real ability there. I've witnessed PK. She reads Tarot with a genuine insight. She's a savant, a human calculator. And a healer. And I mean a *real* healer."

I open my palm to him. "Gashed it with a knife last week. She healed it in an instant."

"Thaumaturgy? Are you serious? Describe her – appearance, background... spare no details."

"Early thirties. A foundling. Her ears are pointed. Stahl's ear would be the medical diagnosis, but that can manifest untidily. Her ears are perfectly elven, like another species, really. If I knew no better I'd say she was an alien fallen to earth, or an ancient form of human, one we'd thought extinct and has suddenly emerged anew from the genome. A direct descendent from the Tuatha de Danaan, perhaps – she is pale of skin and red haired, like in the legends. Or perhaps she's just the elven kind from story books, from Tolkien. But however you write her story there's definitely something magical, something *other* about it."

"You go too far, George... this is pure Romance."

"No, seriously..."

"Are you in love with her?"

"Naturally, but not in the way you're thinking."

He nods. "You must not fall in love with her. I mean, not in the way *I'm* thinking. In the way *you're* thinking, that's good, if you can manage it. That's very noble, though I wager impossible for most. But you? You... I suspect you are up to it. Those girls they threw at you in Canton. Remember?"

"I still dream of them, Nikki."

"But you saw through them."

"Sadly, yes. Though, one or two, it would still have been heavenly to have knowingly ruined myself upon them."

"Ha! Indeed. So... how can I help you, George? Your story intrigues me, indeed it awakens me from what feels like a long slumber, but I do not see how I can help."

"You know more about the European magical traditions than anyone else. The groups, the characters, the attendant charlatans, the hangers on, the rivalries, the myths. Would such a young woman be of interest to any of the less than wholesome characters out there. And are there any such groups or characters operating in Albion today? And would they have an unwholesome interest in

her?"

He raises a finger. "What you say is ringing bells of a warning variety. Speaking as a former magician myself, I would crave her company, in the misguided belief her powers would strengthen my own, as you must know they will strengthen yours. All men such as we, George, seek deeper initiation into the mysteries through the feminine. If there were other magicians about... of a dark persuasion say... they seek it in ways more penetratingly literal, and less subtle than would we."

"Like Clive Martland? Was there something about him? Did he want her kept safe, for himself?..."

Nikki shakes his head. "No, his little coven of boy scouts... it was nothing but a social club. Their meetings were networking events. Real magic would be of no interest to them. And much as I loathed the man, young women were not his weakness. And believe me, I explored that avenue more than once in the hope of getting something on him."

"Then... perhaps Clive had come across another magician, of the sort you describe, one who *would* be interested in her. Does that fly, Nikki? Or am I being too fanciful?"

He thinks a while. "Tell me, how did you meet with Clive? You say the woman, Tamara, roped you in. I need more details, George."

"He had Tamara invite me to a party – theatrical country house thing – one of the many homes belonging to Joshua Malone. You know him? Bent politico, COVID profiteer. Knight of the realm. It was an otherwise unseemly gathering. Half the local underworld, and politicians were there. I also recognised a few tame hacks from way back..."

"Ah... Malone! Yes,...he of the procurement scandals. I do remember him. He was protected of course, probably still is. If you're correct, George, then he's your man. He and Clive were bosom chums, but only professionally, So far as the esoteric is concerned, they were rivals. Enemies, George."

"Clive was his handler?"

"With a man like Malone it's difficult to tell who is handling whom. Personally, I wouldn't have lasted a month without slitting his throat."

"Malone's a magician then?"

"Of course. He's the Grand Poobah of many offices, including his own esoteric order, modelled along the lines of the Golden Dawn.

He thinks no one knows of it, initiates sworn to secrecy on pain of death, and all that – very dramatic – but these secret societies are all inherently leaky. Full of arrogant and immature types who like to brag at parties. There are stories of naked initiations, the despoliation of virgins, and other beastly goings on. I'd certainly want to keep your young lady away from him."

"Tamara claims he's not very good at it. Women. I took it to mean he's sexually incompetent... or something."

"Then if I am reading the situation correctly, Tamara is playing a dangerous game. Does she know of this side of him? He might not be any good at it with a grown woman. Indeed many who indulge in sexual magic fail when forced into equal terms with a lover of their own age, and who considers themselves an equal. But with a girl, bound and helpless, it is more of a perversion, and, like all perversions, it gets them going well enough, at least for a short time. We both know this sort – easily compromised. Indeed if we don't already have something like that on him, the foreign services will. But don't underestimate him, this is also a man of power. And I mean *power,* George."

A cloud takes the sun and the world darkens. I sit back and swallow the whisky in one go. It does not touch the sides. "I wish I'd not asked, Nikki."

"Oh, but you will be glad you did. Now, think, George. A man like Malone will always have security, most likely corrupt former service footsoldiers, not of the highest order, but competent, in a rough sort of way. Consider, my friend, that he may be watching her, or you, or Tamara, or anyone who has met him. He is not a buffoon, though he may act like one. And he is protected, within his home, and within society."

"If they've tried watching Tamara, they're already dead. Watching me?... possibly. It would explain another mystery, and thank God it's not the Russians – well not directly anyway. But, he's not going to be interested in Winona, is he? I mean, a young woman of *genuine* ability. It sounds like ingénues are more his speed. And with all due respects to Winona, I'm sure she's no virgin, and certainly no ingénue."

"Oh, I did not say they would need to be innocents. More likely women with a naive interest in Magik. That would be the lure that reels them in. What he would do if he encountered one such with real power... I suspect he might think to steal it. And, though Clive

and I rarely saw eye to eye, I knew the old bastard well enough, and suspect he would have thought the same about Malone. The only mystery to be solved therefore is why Clive would give a damn, unless he had grown sentimental in his old age."

"But how? How can you steal a power like that?"

"These things are all in the psyche, George. You know that. They are in the power of the personality. If he got hold of her, I have no doubt he could damage her, psychologically. Charm, flattery, the offer of himself as teacher, as a custodian of divine powers. Then cruelty, in the usual way. It would do him no good, of course, in the long run, though he might believe the contrary. But by then the damage to *her* is done, is it not?"

"I do take your point, Nikki. But I doubt Winona could be swayed by his charms, and he's nearly as old as I am."

"Perhaps you underestimate your appeal to the fair sex, George. And thereby also underestimate his."

Still, I'm not convinced anything short of kidnap could persuade Winona to accept the company, let alone the tuition of Sir Joshua Malone. She would see through him at once. Still... "Can we stop him,.. I mean is there a psychical defence that can be worked up?"

"Well, we can always concoct some mumbo jumbo, if it would make you feel better. But no. If Malone is indeed your man, there is only one solution guaranteed to work, and it's really very simple."

"Which is?"

"You must kill him, George."

Chapter Thirty Seven

Lie Back and Think of England

In which we ruminate afresh on the figure of Joshua Malone, promote him from cliche, to a more proper footing as a villain, while at the same time pointing out his clear vulnerabilities. We discover our sanctuary has been breached in our absence, and wonder who would be so crass as to insult our intelligence in such a way. We are summoned under pretences of positive feedback by Tamara, with whom we fence timidly and come off far the worse. And finally, we realise, in attempting our rescue of Winona, we have also become a player in the story of the rescuer, the one in which we must eventually let go of those we have rescued lest they, in turn, become our victims, willing or otherwise. Oh... and Tamara invites us to her bed. So...

Of course, I don't intend *killing* anyone. Nikki always did have a touch of the dramatics about him. Not that he wouldn't hesitate, and most likely get away with it, too, for he is a cunning man. But he has definitely piqued my interest in Malone. I was guilty of making a dull cliche of him, ergo: wealthy, well connected, and spectacularly corrupt. It strikes me his lesser known peccadilloes are, in fact, well known, at least to those who make it their business to know these things – I mean, if they are also known to Nikki.

The reason Malone is not yet ruined by scandal then is he serves a useful function, both to the superficial, and the deeper state. I suppose what I'm saying is Malone will be hoist by his own petard soon enough – one way or the other. For even if his material sins do not catch up with him, there is always this thing with magicians, that their devils eventually catch them up, and in the process render them insane and useless. It happened to Nikki. And if it's true Malone plays that game for blood, it will happen to him too.

The ego thinks it can control such forces, and Malone does not strike me as particularly lacking in ego. You wonder how this can be true when magic is something we merely make up. Then tell me, have you any phobias? It is your head that invents them. Now multiply them ten fold, and imagine life caught up permanently in their vortex. That is the world of the magician.

I wonder if Tamara knows this side of him. And of course if Malone is even half way competent, he already knows more about her than she would like him to. But then, of course, I only know of

their relationship what Tamara has told me, and this will be for operational purposes. She might even be a magician herself, partner to Malone in dark ritual, though I doubt it. One can usually tell. Even so, the thought leaves me cold. But I'm losing myself as the truth shifts beneath me. I am losing you, too. I feel it.

Anyway, we return from our interview with Nikki, to the farm. Like my father's house, it is already lost to us and ringing hollow. Where then is a man to lay his head, so he might sleep like he slept as a child? Elaine is gone to be with her mother, and the young ones are making plans. I tell myself it was only supposed to be a temporary lodgings anyway, but the hidden side of me had clearly hoped for it to last a little longer. It seems ironic, a region so neglected as this, indeed forgotten by all save those who live here, should be among the few remaining temperate places on earth, and already the money moving in, snatching what bits of it they can from under our feet.

As evening comes on, there is a magnificent sunset, but I close the shutters against it, as if raging at the uselessness of its beauty. I am tempted by the red room, but fear I am too tired and disturbed in spirit to enter it, and then too muddled to make sense of Mr Williams, should he choose to communicate by Tarot.

You were going to ask what is the difference between my psychic entities and Nikki's? After all, what else is Mr Williams but a psychic entity, an avatar from the archetypes of the unconscious mind? Oh... You weren't? Well, I'll tell you anyway: the mystic approaches his archetypes with humility, seeking wisdom, which is given freely enough, if he chooses his friends in the other world wisely, and asks nicely. But the magician commands his entities to work magic in *this* world, and for that, as in all the stories, there is a price to pay.

Jasmine taps upon the door and informs me that, in my absence, there has been a problem with the Internet, which required her to admit gentlemen of The Provider access to our rooms. She is sorry if this unsettles me, but she could not get in touch to ask permission, and the gentlemen were very quick. I tell her not to trouble herself over it. Indeed such types are surprisingly quick, know exactly what they are looking for, and where to find it.

I presume my laptop has had a mirror made of its hard drive, and unsavoury wares tucked away inside of it. There may also be devices of the listening variety secreted about the room. Or do I

give myself airs? My working drive has always been an encrypted memory card that I carry with me. But this does not protect me from such devils as keystroke recording. No bother. The machine was an old Ebay purchase, and its final task is to secure its replacement by the same means.

So... was it Tamara, or Malone who commissioned such a crass breach? And what did they think they would find?

Do they really think me so stupid? Clearly they do.

I message Winona, advise her to moor up, and settle in for a time, to be in no hurry to approach Middleton until she hears from me again. Indeed she would be well advised to turn the boat around at the next winding hole, and disappear into the waterways, south and west, and not tell me where she's gone. After all, I'm not sure how well I'll bear up to a beating, if Malone decided the only way to get to her is to stoop to ungentlemanly means.

And yet, and yet... we spoke of Ripon, once. Ripon lies to the North. I mean this in a mythical kind of way, that the Lady Lucy shall moor up there, in Ripon, at the end of our story. The north is the place of new beginnings, you see? The west is the place of endings, of journeys to the underworld. East and south are places of the past, and to which one should never return. We must go north then, and run the gauntlet of the ghouls circling Middleton. But first we need protection. And lacking influence in the manifest world, we must turn our luck to the mystical.

We spoke of the Watchman, remember? Did we? I'm sorry I can't remember, now. I'll tell you again: at nine p.m. every evening, for eleven hundred years, the Watchman of Ripon has sounded his horn in the market square. I am not making this up. I have dreamed of him a few times recently, and this seems significant. In times of uncertainty, Viking raids, and so on, it was reassuring for a people to know the watch was set, and the night hours patrolled. There might still be an alarm but at least one would not be murdered in one's bed. There is a kind of magic in it, in the ritual, the long coats, the tricorn hat, the horn... And so what? Well, I fancy Winona would be safe there, under guard of the watchman.

But would she also be safe from me? By this I mean, what we must also guard against is the archetype of the rescuer.

All archetypes, all stories have their good and bad aspects. I think I have done a good thing, in rescuing, and so far concealing Winona. But at some point I realise the rescuer has to let the

rescued go, otherwise they become his victim. I must let Winona go, at some point, not make a lover or a daughter of her, or I shall ruin us both. This was Nikki's meaning. And he was right to point it out.

Oh dear, I do seem to be waffling. So cut to it, George!

Where are we now?

Very well. Morning brings the postman, and a message *en clair* from Tamara. No one bothers to intercept the Royal Mail any more. We think only of computers and social media accounts. And like so many other useful things in life, you cannot steam open an envelope while sitting at a computer. Anyway, I am summoned, and with some urgency. So, days later, crack of dawn, I purchase a newspaper from the railway station, this by way of nostalgic novelty – I mean the scent and feel of newsprint – and I sit to await my train.

In the age of digitisation the presses can only keep going by massive injections of political subsidy, which, naturally, makes them organs of propaganda. I think it was Orwell who said that history stopped in 1936, and he has a point. I take middlebrow copies of left and right persuasion, so I might explore between the lines of each. I know most of the hacks, and their oeuvres. Without such knowledge of course, it is impossible to actually read a newspaper.

Anyway, the left is baited by the right over vaginas, that old wedge-issue of whether the possession of one is compulsory in order to be considered a woman. The right is vexed by the usual tropes of benefit scroungers and immigration. Russia, the old enemy, is being talked up as belligerent again, now threatening invasion of the allied Baltics. Markets are jittery, teetering on the edge of a dramatic correction. The inside money will be selling. The more war-horny hacks, and the pundits are warming up the nuclear rhetoric.

And then, a photograph from the cabinet room at Number 10, an accompanying puff piece on a minor ministerial reshuffle. We are currently on our sixth PM in six years, a giddy state of affairs – one of permanent campaign, and little serious governance. Anyway, there he sits, surrounded by his ministers of state, including several fresh appointees. But the talent pool is becoming smaller as the government exhausts itself, and there are more than a few faces of little renown, including one – whom I shall codename Fishbrain – whose face also graces certain files in my possession, these from

way back, and which make up my dead-man's handle, of which I have already spoken. Heavens... if Fishbrain should ever land the top job – hardly beyond the bounds of possibility these days – my own humble demise would bring down the government.

So, anyway, the train. Yes. Eventually. I have been invited to Morecambe, on Lancashire's most north western coast, and to the Art Deco Midland hotel, a recently renovated building, and to a suite with a sea view, at least when the tide is in. But the tide does go rather a long way out at Morecambe, and looks miserable when it does so, as it has done so this morning. Morecambe is not the first place I would have thought to locate Tamara, and perhaps this is why she chooses it. Or perhaps I delude myself. Remember, there are no certainties here, no reliable narratives. She might have been born here, have family still, a husband and children.

It was a slow, and nauseating journey in a forty year old carriage. My fellow rail passengers were mercifully few, but dishevelled, dirty and ill mannered. The train broke down at Lancaster, and a bus was laid on for the final stage of the journey, this at the mercy of a ponderous, diesel belching charabanc. I would have driven myself, but the price of fuel has doubled overnight, and the vehicle needs filling. Fuel prices have been volatile since the Ukrainian conflict of course. Much else has been volatile since long before that.

"Sorry I'm late, Tamara. Terrible journey."

"I was beginning to think I'd been stood up. But, darling, you look awful."

The bed has been slept in, and there is the scent of night breath, which I find uncomfortable – altogether too intimate at this time of the day. She sits in a bathrobe by the window, bathed in light, has rather nice legs and pink toenails. I wonder if she and Malone have been together here, and it is actually sex I can smell. People say you can smell sex, though, personally, I never could. Either way, the thought rather puts me off my breakfast.

"Sorry, George. That's no way to greet a friend. There's coffee in the jug. Do help yourself."

I do help myself, and gratefully, then relax into a sofa, and admire the view of the bay – also, it has to be said, the view of Tamara's legs, which she seems to keep on display for said purposes. Why is that? Is she flirting with me? That I should find these particular legs alluring is not the point here, at least not in the

usual way. It's more that I am capable of experiencing any sort of allure is the novelty to be explored. As for the display itself, why she should feel the need to make one I cannot imagine, and this worries me. Was she disappointed to find nothing on my computer and seeks now other methods of investigation?

It was not Tamara. She would not insult your intelligence.

What is it she really *wants* from you, George? I mean right now.

Does she know you have been speaking to Nikki?

Assume she does, but don't volunteer anything.

"You were wrong," she tells me.

"Oh? Please, remind me."

"The data. From Elaine. It was a useful mine of information, exactly as we were hoping. Couldn't ask for more, Darling. Saved us years. Well done."

"And?"

"And nothing. I'm simply giving you some positive feedback – as they say."

"Do people still say that? How quaint. And the reason I was wrong?"

"You thought the ease with which it was obtained suggested it might contain misinformation, or at any rate that a bigger game was afoot, some elaborate conspiracy with Elaine and the Frenchies at the bottom of it."

"It was a possibility. Still is, so far as I'm concerned. Any analyst worth their salt would have put the same caveats upon it."

"Well, it's pure gold. I can't explain why she was so eager to give it up, other than whatever she told you. Have you not considered the obvious?"

"The obvious being?"

"She's in love with you."

"Ah... that. No. Elaine is not in love with me. Are you sure there's nothing at all in her background?"

"Nothing that rings alarm bells. Some minor points of interest. Her grandfather was in the resistance. Those who collaborated in his home village met a violent end after the war, and he was believed to be the one responsible. And her father was in the diplomatic service. Did she tell you that?"

"It's hard to get past the mother with Elaine. All I know of the father is that the mother hated him."

"And she has family in France."

"Yes, she has aunts there."

"Well, it's all a bit thin, George. But she might still be useful to us. I'm thinking of her father particularly."

"He's been dead a long time. You'll get nothing out of him."

"I mean former colleagues, and so on. People who remember him, and are still in diplomatic positions."

"Oh, I know where you're going with this... "

"Just sound her out, darling. Discreetly. Deniably. All we're thinking here are channels. Channels of communication."

The idea is ridiculous, but I do want to see Elaine again, tidy things up, so to speak, so I agree. I also want to see how grateful Tamara can show herself to be in granting me what it is I want, which is the State's protection of innocence in the form of the magical Winona.

She changes the subject: "So... have you had any more trouble, since we last spoke?"

"Concerning?"

"Your followers. We've made enquiries but struck a blank. Are you sure you didn't imagine it?"

"Oh, those two. I've not seen them for a bit. Someone had a go at my laptop recently. The old 'problem with the internet' trick. It could have been them."

Her reaction is neutral. "You're taking precautions there, aren't you?"

"As best I can. But, as I keep reminding you, I was never a field operator, so what precautions I can muster are home-spun, and certainly not state of the art."

"I'll have them looked into again."

"Thanks, but I suspect they're something to do with Malone."

Perhaps I should not have said that. There is no neutrality this time, indeed there is a definite twitch of surprise in Tamara's eyes. "And what makes you say that?"

"A man with his connections, I presume he runs a shift of personal security minders. As for why, I think he's interested in the girl. He wants to know where she is."

"Girl?"

"Winona."

"Ah, *that* girl. You're telling me something I don't know, which is terribly fascinating, also irritating. But please, go on."

"What else do you know about him?"

That is not for her to say, and stupid of me to ask. "What else do *you* know about him?"

"Only what bits of low level intel crossed my desk, in the old days." Yes, I'm bluffing now. He never crossed my desk, but given what we know, he most likely crossed someone's. Clive's perhaps? "Corruption. Profiteering. Price gouging."

She puts me on warning with an impatient sigh. "This is common knowledge. What else do you have that's *relevant*, George?"

"He's a magician."

"A what?"

"I don't mean a stage magician, a magic circle type of magician. He's..."

"I know what kind of magician you mean. But honestly, darling, this is news to me."

"If that's true, you've got me worried."

"What else?"

"Abuser of young women... in the pursuit of his – em – magical rites. Magicians of his sort tend to use them up in great quantities, and he tends to pick on those he judges would be too embarrassed to complain about it afterwards."

We have her attention now. She does know this aspect of him, I'm sure. But how do *we* know it? Assume your weariest face, George, and believe the lie you are about to tell. Create of it an alternate reality, and *live* it. Be there, George, now do it: "Clive once had me go through lists of the more august members of the esoteric orders... Masonic and such like. All except the one he was a member of himself, of course." Smile, George, as if in fond reminiscence. You're doing well. She's still listening. "That side of Malone came up then."

Clearly, your knowing this disturbs her, though she is trying to cover it. "Well, all men have their little hobbies. I'm sure you have a few yourself."

"Oh, indeed. But it would be unwise to underestimate the powers of a magician like Malone. Your belief or otherwise in the supernatural is irrelevant here. He's a cunning bastard, that's all I need to know. You might think you're running him, but one day you'll discover he's the one running you. So... make sure you can get out. Vanish in thirty seconds. *Excuse me, I'm just nipping to the loo*, and then you're gone."

"Your concern for my well being is very sweet and duly noted.

But... I'm curious... why would a man like Malone be interested in a waif like Winona? You're saying it's because she's an ingénue and would be too embarrassed to complain afterwards. But, and I'm sorry if this sounds crass, but there are lots of young women of his own class, darling, who would answer that description. Why would he go down-budget and set his sights on a common little thing like her."

"Like her?"

"Yes, I mean, one who drops her 'haiches' all over the place, or something."

Yes, she's testing me by her calculated offensiveness. How much does Winona mean to me? Am I to leap to her defence? No... it would be wiser to let that one slide.

"Ordinarily, I suppose you're right, Tamara. But Winona has something that trumps her lowly station in life. And that is her familiarity with the esoteric. Winona is a witch. It intrigued Clive, too, when she came to his attention. He knew Malone would be interested in her. He also knew of Malone's reputation in the dark arts. Clive outwitted him, had her vanish, Clive being a bit of a magician himself. I was useful to him in that respect, and I'm glad to have been of service, but his demise does rather make the assignment somewhat open ended. If that's simply a case of keeping her out of sight until Malone sets his sights on someone else, then all well and good. But if he comes looking for her... I don't see how I can hold him off for long. And he *will* find her."

All right, George, now make your play. You have already been told what you can do for Tamara, and you have performed well. She has fed you back some middling positivity. Now tell Tamara what she can do for you: "At any rate, that's my assessment of the situation. But I'll need help. We might need a legend for her, some money..."

Except I can see in Tamara's eyes, I have misjudged my position, and in fact rendered myself vulnerable. I have declared a greater need than hers, thus one to be exploited for yet further services. She is a sharp one, and is looking at me like she has already decided how to exploit my weakness. "Well, not my department, really, George." First the rebuff, the closed door, which she will now open a crack. "However... I promise I shall make enquiries."

You see how smooth she is?

"Em... thank you. I don't want to be stuck with Winona for ever."

A feasible lie, but be careful. "It's possible Clive may already have prepared something. It would just take a little digging."

Patronising smile, now. "He might."

So, be humble, George. But not too much. "Thank you, again." And wait for the sting. Here it comes:

"Now, George, there's something else I need from you... oh, don't look at me like that. It's really very simple, and actually quite pleasant, or at least I think so. I am in need of your company."

"My company?"

"For a little event Sir Joshua wants me to attend. But, since his wife will also be there, his mistress needs a passable beau, as cover, like last time, but this time to prevent embarrassment to his wife, poor soul. I don't know why she puts up with him."

"So why does she?"

"Oh, he's very careful not to publicly insult her. A good deal of his finances and properties and such are in her name."

"I get it. In life he's a multi-millionaire, but on paper he's broke. So... like last time, I suppose?" Brave face it, George. "It'll be a pleasure to work with you. Same place?"

"No. This is a much bigger event. We'll be travelling to Oxfordshire, to a conference of sorts... can't say where just yet, but I'll be in touch."

"And I'm what?..."

"Well, one of the delegates of course, but don't worry, it's more of an excuse for dinner and networking, and a few nights in a grand old country house."

"And you thought of me?"

"You've already been seen in my company, George, and you're the only one who's both handy, and still cleared to that level."

"Cleared?"

"You know what I mean. There will be *people* there, and *security*. You may be retired, but your clearance stands. I've checked. You get a pass, and a suit, and by the looks of it you need a new pair of shoes. And can you get yourself a proper haircut? It looks like you've been doing it yourself. I mean... you haven't *actually* been doing it yourself, have you? Oh, George. We must always do better than that. Putting on a show isn't just for the benefit of others, you know. We feel better in ourselves, too."

"All right."

She gives me a sympathetic look. "Also, think about it. It'll be

useful, given what you've just told me, if at some point we could get you and Malone in the same room, then we could test your suspicions regarding, em... what's-her-name."

Tamara knows her name, but feigns to forget it at every opportunity. "Winona. Yes. But how would we do that?"

"I don't know. We'll wing it and see. I'm sure we'll come up with something. And if it's true, then... well, we'll see what can be done about it, within the bounds of operational necessity of course. A little yank on his chain should be enough. But remember, Joshua Malone is a sacred object at the moment, serving a useful function and anyone threatening to embarrass him, is more likely to be the one we come down upon, and *heavily*."

A veiled warning. But I have already made up my mind about Malone.

None of this sounds particularly pleasurable, or feasible, and then she tells me. "But look on the bright side: if all else fails, we get to spend a couple of nights together. Speaking of which, I'd better add you some pyjamas to the list. Heaven knows what you're used to sleeping in, but I'm very particular."

"I'm not sleeping with you, Tamara."

"Oh, but needs must darling. We must both simply lie back and think of England."

Chapter Thirty Eight

The Good that we Know.

In which we discuss the meaning of life, and meditation... again. We discuss, the universe awakening through each of us, and the temptation to withdraw into caves and contemplate our navels. We discuss the intelligence of the heart, and doing all the good that we know. So...

I fear we must pause at this point in our journey for breath, and to meditate. And I must apologise. I mean, in retrospect, that was a very low hook to hang you on, the suggestion of Tamara and I sharing a bed. Worse, it was ungentlemanly of me, but alas, it seems it is a situation that must at some point be faced.

She is a strange creature. The assertiveness, the poshness – since our first meeting I have been unable to shake the feeling all of this is an act. That she is competent in her field, I have no doubt, but she is of an age to be waking up, to be facing that bifurcation of ways in which she either maintains course, becomes cynical and cruel, or she breaks opens the door of the cage she is in, and seeks meaning.

Thoughts drift to Elaine but, cruel though this may sound, I conclude there is no Elaine beyond the mother.

I am sitting out, as is my habit, by the standing stone, on the moor. There was once a fashion for assigning to these things the properties of nodes for the subtle energy the geomancers talk about. Even given my own metaphysical leanings these days, I doubt there is any truth in such things, but one never knows, and anyway, right now I'm finding it a comfort to believe I am coursed through with a cleansing energy.

And may the force be with you!

Then again, it may be nothing more complicated than the walk out from the farm, and the consequent view of russet hills, during this golden hour. I apologise also for mention of the view, if it should irritate you. I am mixing my genres. Thrillers and spy stories never mention the view. Nor do they ruminate much on the feelings, or the sensibilities of their characters. But then, you only think this is a spy story, when, as I have told you before, I am attempting to lure you towards a greater revelation. If you can only bear it, or less likely, believe it.

Meanwhile, I drift in and out of time. One moment it's the moor

as it is now, the next it's the moor as it was a thousand, or even ten thousand years ago. And for all that time, it was mostly bog. But things are changing. The earth is changing. Even before my eyes the rushes are browning, growing brittle for want of water, and the bogs are sinking as they dry. And the reservoirs, fed by the moors, are dwindling, never more than half full now, even after winter storms. We take the water in our taps for granted. I suspect we cannot adapt quickly enough to what is coming, that indeed we risk near extinction by the next century.

So then time itself will stop, since it is we, by dint of consciousness, who set the clocks ticking in the first place. And since it is also we who give the universe form, I mean in the shape our senses grant it, the universe too will cease to exist, or at least be aware of itself. And it vexes me we can do nothing about that. It vexes me we have made all the wrong choices. I mean politically, socially, economically, environmentally.

It vexes me I never married, that I have no children, that I lack direction, that I lack solutions to even the most basic problems of my own life, let alone yours. We are all the same in this, all of us brothers and sisters, chasing whatever *vexes* us, because we ache for the completion we imagine the solution to our problems will bring. But in this we miss the point entirely. We mistake the feeling, *mistake the call* for what it is.

But what does *that* mean, George?

It is no more, no less than the call to awaken.

Who am I? I am George Swift, of course – so named. I am a retired backroom boy to The Service, once upon a time pressed to the front as chaff when pot-shots were to be taken. I am slightly damaged as a result, but still functional. I am all these things with labels. I am words. But that is just my back-story, and one day it will come to an end. There's something else, though, something that calls me now and then to the red room, in order to seek a deeper knowledge of myself. If only I could believe in it. And since I cannot use words to describe what it is I seek, neither you nor I are any the wiser, except perhaps in the way we interpret that pull towards contemplation.

Unplugging all connections,
Unfastening all the snares,
Might we not embrace this cleaner air,
And fall?

See how tight we cling
To things
Of no consequence,
Our fingers jammed in every crack,
Our arms, oh so tired now,
And aching,
Legs, fearful, shaking.

Did I write that?

No, no you fool. That was Winona – she who now calls herself Sharon. *She* wrote that. Sharon. Charon, the ferryman.

I *knew* that would happen.

Let it go, let it all go,
And backwards fall, and trust.
No dash of rocks, no rush
Of earth to black.
There is only this endless void, and true,
In which we might begin,
To embrace the world anew,
Then open up our Eye,
And let the clearer light, of day,
Come flooding in.

Is it Winona, then, who is the purer mystic, and not poor old George Swift? Swifty, as they used to call him. Is it George, who is in danger of becoming the magician, this in order to prove his connection with the void. Which makes three of us: Clive Martland, weary civil servant, Masonic Grand Master, and Magician (ceremonial only) - deceased. Sir Joshua thingy-bob, politician, crook, theosophist, Grand Master and Magician (of the dark sort). And then there's you, George. What have you all in common, you three wastrels? It is your ageing, your worldliness, your esotericism, and the allure of Winona. You are brothers in this, George.

Milo: *You had better look after her.*

Why?

Because even in poverty, and in barbarism, are sown the seeds of our salvation, or at least our hope for any kind of expanding future. This is not *my* future, you understand? Mine is done. But your children's perhaps, or their children's children. They might see it. See what?

A new Earth.

Ah... the perennial quest for Arcadia.

This is why I have to think of ways, once I have secured her path, to let Winona go. And of course, to secure her path will take a magician's powers, a magician's wisdom, a magician's guile.

Nikki: *Do you think we're done evolving, George?*

What?

Oh,... *that*.

We are thirty years ago, now, he and I, in a tea house in Hong Kong. It is time-out from preparing to withdraw our missions from the colony. The army is practising its ceremonial retreat to the docks, and the withdrawal of Albion's Easternmost station. At the same times as clearing my desk and shredding documents, I am studying intel on the likelihood of the Chinese jumping the gun, and invading the colony. I am fielding deluded tabloid hacks who claim knowledge of troop build-ups on the border. I have concluded it is nonsense. The Chinese would not be so crass, but stories have a momentum of their own, whether they be true or not. Nikki's question, therefore, strikes me as irrelevant under the circumstances, but I can see now he had already moved on from this life, while I struggle still to do so.

"Do you think this is *it* for us?" he asks.

It?

He means it in the broad sense, I suppose, as in "the human race". Are we at the pinnacle of our evolution, at least as it was pre-millennium. There were jitters then. Perhaps you are even old enough to recall them? They were the usual fears: societal collapse, conspiracies of Armageddon, even of space aliens scribbling giant glyphs in our corn-fields. It was the end days, and all of it conveniently predicted by the turn of the Mayan calendar.

Stories.

We have always been a people of paradox. Our rational natures and opposable thumbs have built great cities, and machines, but we have always been frightened by our stories, haunted by the demons that would pull down our finest works.

"I hope not, Nikki. But I see little chance of improvement, if the current milieu is anything to go by. Why? Do you?"

"We must think beyond our present predicament, George. Look to the development of the psyche."

"Ah... that old thing. I don't see how that can work, really. There's always been this handful of people who'll find their way onto a higher plane. I don't deny its existence, and good for them,

old boy. But then they disappear into caves. They don't change anything for the rest of us, do they? It doesn't alter the price of bread. Bread is what feeds people. And, when pressed, people will always think of their bellies first."

I remember I used to enjoy teasing him. Others were afraid of him, even his seniors in the service, but I had found a rich vein of humour in him, and he seemed not to mind my exploring it.

"We have no choice, George. The universe is waking up though us. We cannot remain at such a primitive level as this, and still fulfil its ambitions. The universe will find a way, through us. This is its purpose, and therefore it leaves us no choice in the matter."

This was Nikki the optimist, before his magic failed him, and he turned to alcohol. I wanted to believe in him, since he had already taught me so much that had proved true. But in this I felt we were at odds.

"I agree, the universe is a source of infinite and fundamental energy, and it may indeed be trying to know itself through us. But judging by my observations of humankind so far, we are mostly low wattage light bulbs, already far exceeding our capacity. The universe can do no more through us. One more milliamp of demand, and all the lights will go out. Poof! No, I think its for each of us to perfect ourselves as best we can in this mess of suffering and limitation. If there's any purpose in that, it's to set the boundary conditions for our leaving this world, and entering the next. If we are to level up, it's not here, not us, and not the generations to come either. They'll suffer the same, or worse..."

"Ah... but George, George... the universe breathes in, and it breathes out. We must learn to breathe with it. Otherwise what are we for? What good can we do while we are here? Grow fat off our capital? You don't think that, surely? We breathe in, to the point of awakening. Then we must breathe out..."

"But what can we do? No one believes in this stuff. The world is calcifying, becoming roboticised, lobotomised. We're going backwards."

"We must bring the little bit of good we know into the world. Think about this, George: before we evolved, there was no good. The world was inhabited only by unthinking creatures who ate other unthinking creatures. It was we who *created* the good."

"But what is 'good'? Millions have died at the hands of others who thought they were doing what was good."

"Only because they did not know what was truly 'good'. What is truly good comes from an intelligence of the heart, and to achieve that sense, one must become more fully human. By contrast, any talk of good that comes from the intellect must always be suspect. You may be right, that we level up in the next life, I do not dispute that on philosophical, or metaphysical grounds, but I suggest we only qualify for entry once we have become more fully human in *this life*, and enacted all the good that we know. Otherwise yes, sit back, content yourself with being sub-human, and grow fat off your capital. Then... *then*, George, we will surely, all of us, be a long time dead."

Chapter Thirty Nine

A Long Time Dead

In which we discuss the breathing in and the breathing out of the universe, how to perfect the individual amid tyranny, or merely surrender to barbarism. We meet Elaine's mother, and we consider the order of events – should we seduce Elaine before we recruit her, or the other way around, or neither, and since we believe her to be willing on both counts, does it really matter? And, finally, remembering Tamara's advice, we visit the barber. So...

Odd, this talk of capital, since mine was the last generation to own anything. Now, nobody except a small class of rentiers expects to own capital. The problem my generation presented this predatory class was our accumulation of wealth through the ownership of personal property, and our ability to bequeath it. The care home system was therefore inflated to close this loophole, in return for relieving our progeny from the burden of caring for their old ones.

Now our progeny are programmed to see it as acceptable to imprison us at the first sign of incapacity, at the cost of the divestment of our capital – our homes, our pensions, our savings – into the hands of the rentier class. There is no return from such a dystopia, not this century anyway, not before all the struggles of the Victorian, the Edwardian and indeed the bookends of both Georgian eras have been fought all over again.

There is no immediate solution, no radical action to be taken that will bring about an instant remedy to the hurt you are feeling, for history also teaches us radical action of the revolutionary variety risks ending in only greater tyranny than was had before. Civilisation, if it evolves decently, does so imperceptibly, glacially, guided by the ruminations of slow, and honourable men. That said, I'm certain Albion will rise again, but first it must hit rock bottom. And no, we are not there, yet. I have seen rock bottom in other places, and it's an unpleasant destination, at least for the majority of the population, this being from the middle down.

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Heavens, and all that. Blake indeed!
The new Jerusalem!
But where on earth does one turn when all is in ruins? Others

have pondered long on this and come up with two options: one is barbarism, which is obvious enough, and a favoured option throughout the ages. The other is the perfection of the individual, which is easier when the deceit of Capital has been blown away, and all you're left with are the clothes you stand up in, or sometimes not even those.

How to perfect the individual, how to become more fully human? Well, you sit under a tarpaulin, stripped of your wealth, and your future, and you meditate on what you have, which is nothing. And it may surprise you to find there is a doorway there, that what you have sought all your life, you possessed all along. It was just this stuff, and the imagined need for more, that hid the secret from you. You made the mistake of thinking you were your feelings for your stuff. To realise you are not, this is the breathing in of the universe Nikki spoke to us about. But what of the breathing out?

Happiness with nothing? Does that sound at all likely to you? I thought not, but since everything is to be taken away from you, it's worth a shot, right? Will your breathing out then be to the universe's benefit, or will you choose barbarism instead? Barbarism is more clearly signposted, but I urge you to resist its temptations, or then, as Nikki also said, we will all of us be a long time dead.

Nikki's conundrum then: breathing out. How do we fulfil the will of the universe, in this world? By doing the good that we know, he said. But we will only know what is truly good when we can identify it through an intelligence of the heart, something that comes from being more fully human. Yes, yes,... it was a long time ago, a quarter of a century ago when we discussed these things, and I can't exactly say I've made much progress, but sometimes we are not ready, and must make several passes at the same lessons before they stick. To become more fully human? What is that like. Well, it's easier to describe what it is not...

"I don't like you, George."

Ah... forgive me. We are interrupted. We'll have to pick this up later.

"What was that, June?"

"I said. I. Don't. Like. You."

"Indeed, that's what I thought you said. And I'm very sorry to hear it."

We have travelled to Albion's North Eastern coast now, to the decrepit care home of Elaine's mother. Oh, yes, we meet the mother

at last, and she is indeed a nasty piece of work. I'm not sure why Elaine wanted me to visit. It was to test my mettle, perhaps. But anyway, here we are. I have swapped the sunset coast of England for the sunrise. I have exchanged the art deco splendour of the Midland Hotel for this former Victorian asylum, in mock Gothic, which still has bars on its windows. The mother has complained of being hot, and Elaine has been dispatched to find a staff member who might be persuaded to unlock the window and swing it open a crack. It is a pretence, so the mother can tear a strip off me, put me in my place.

"I'll ruin you," she adds. "Stay away from my daughter. I know your type."

If I can find but one virtue in the brief time I have known June, it is that she is admirably direct. But need I respond to this? I admit to feeling somewhat absent today. I'm still thinking of Tamara, thinking of my mission as a recruiter, wondering if Elaine – contrary to my instincts – might actually be in love with me, wondering if Tamara will be as good as her word, and find the resources to help protect Winona, in return for my "company", whatever that entails. If I must sleep with her, I shall, though it will be most awkward. At least I was able to persuade her to pay for my petrol, and put me up in a luxury hotel. I'm thinking Elaine and I might enjoy its comforts, later on. It was a small victory, but not to be sniffed at.

You sly old dog, George!

"Are you listening? I said..."

"Indeed I am. But what type is that, June?"

"Penniless waster. Man your age, never married..."

"Ah, Indeed... I am of an age, and never married... this is true. Penniless? Well,... how does one measure wealth, or lack thereof? I've not done too badly... and I still have all my own teeth. Flossing, and fluoride toothpaste are, of course, the wonders of the modern dental era."

The feeble attempt at humour is not appreciated. June does not listen, and possesses no discernible sense of the humorous, anyway. She is a cranky old machine, set on transmit. "You'll never see her again..."

"But I rather hoped we'd be enjoying dinner, later."

"I'll remind her she'll get nothing, and then she'll drop you, like she dropped all the others."

"Nothing, June? I'm not sure I follow... and – strictly between us – how many others have there been?"

"I'll give it all to cats, or dogs, I don't care..."

We're talking legacy, of course, the last desperate lever of the old, who have neglected to sow sufficient kindness. Yet, so far as I understand June's financial situation, she already has nothing, no chips to bargain with. The home has already taken it. It would be indelicate of me to remind her, though. It's a sad situation. For Elaine, I mean. Not that she will inherit nothing. I'm sure she's already fully aware of that, and has made her own arrangements. But so fully invested is she in servicing this odious hag, when the mother dies, as I predict she will do in the next two to five years, Elaine will collapse into a spiral of depression and guilt.

Would she prefer then to sacrifice her own life that her mother might live for ever, though it would only be to poison future generations? For a smile or a word of loving approval, yes she would. She cannot help it, for such is the fate of the emotionally neglected child. And I've already told you there's nothing I can do about it. I strikes me as ironic, that the love and kindness my father showed me all our time together makes it easier for me to bid him a fond farewell. I am saddened yes, but undamaged by the experience of having known him. Indeed, quite the opposite. His memory bolsters my spirit.

So. The mother. Here she sits, in this wing backed chair, a theatrical dowager: blue hair, a certain vanity in the rouge on her cheeks. She fancies herself still possessed of some allure, and self determination, when she might, and by all accounts *did*, rule the roost at home, and mostly ruin the lives of those around her. How many would-be suitors have sat through this interview?

"Elaine and I are simply good friends, June. There is no hint of matrimony, at least that I am aware. Has she said anything to the contrary?"

"Pah. Man-friends are just lovers in waiting... but what she sees in you, I can't imagine."

"Well, there's no accounting for taste."

Humour again. It falls flat. Elaine returns – and thank goodness – breezes in, catches the relief in my eyes. I had just about run out of platitudes, to say nothing of energy. "They'll be straight up," she says, and then, rather more brightly than is necessary: "So, how are we getting on, then?"

The mother again: "And you believed them? You always were naive. I'll be lucky if its tea-time when they come, and bedtime when I get my tea." She bangs her walking stick into the carpet for emphasis.

"Well, they do seem rather run off their feet, Mum. But I'm sure they do their best."

I don't know. Would I do my best for the little they are paid? Would you? I had wondered if there was something special about the home that kept her mother here, but I find it has little to recommend it. It is an anchor around Elaine's feet which, as she has already intimated, is more likely the point of it. There are cobwebs hanging from the light fittings, and from the corners of the ceiling. The wall beneath the window is mouldy.

In such decay do we grow old and die, eh, George? The tree has fallen, and it made no sound. What does that even mean any more? Things are thus because we imagine them so, or rather we can imagine no alternative? Yes the universe relies on us to give it meaning, to give it sound and vision. I note the manager drives a Bentley, parks it out front for all to admire, and I suppose is immune to shame. Truth, George. What is true here? All I know is I will need a good shower tonight, to get the smell of the place from my pores. What does the universe think of that? But the universe does not think, George. It is we who do the thinking for it. In which case my earnestness is overwhelmed by June's poison, and we are all truly doomed!

She casts me a scornful look. We are not done, she is saying. But we are, in fact, done. I will gladly not volunteer my presence in her company again. An hour later, Elaine and I are on the promenade of this seaside place, overcoats fastened against the wind, sand stinging our faces. We are walking close, so we can hear each other above the wind and the waves, both of us needing air, and a slap in the face.

"Was mother rude to you?"

"Indeed she was. Very much along the lines you suspected."

"I'm sorry, George. It was good of you to come, all the same."

No matter. The mother is not why I am here. And no, I am not here to recruit Elaine into the service either, though the pretence of it must somehow be carried out. I am here because I enjoy her company, and was rather hoping she might allow me to make love with her in the luxury of my hotel-room. So, do we wait for dinner,

or do we get down to business now, get it out of the way, then we can actually enjoy dinner on some semblance of sincerity and truth? Then do it now, George, *now*:

"Your father was in the diplomatic service, I hear."

"Yes. Where did you hear that? Oh... of course. Silly. I should really find all of this a bit sinister. The thought of your friends collating a dossier on me."

"It's really not that bad. Heaven knows what they've got on me. And you have a lot of other things to worry about, of course, closer to home."

"You mean mother? Oh... we all have our cross to bear. One day I hope to discover yours. But my father? He wasn't very senior or anything. Or at least I don't think so. He was like you, always playing it down. Just a civil servant, he would say. Like you do. Why do you mention it?"

"They want a little more from you, Elaine."

"But... I have nothing more on the firm, if that's what they mean. Everything was on that stick. And I mean *everything*. I'm out of there now, working for a different firm altogether, a much tidier ship too, much... cleaner."

"They were pleased with what you gave them. But this is something else, another story they're piecing together, quite a long game I should think. If I'm right, it'll be to look up your father's friends, former colleagues. I don't know. It's how they work, feeling things out, building up potential networks. I suspect it's back channels they're looking for, rather than espionage. We're not officially friendly with the French right now, you see? Politically, diplomatically. The old parliamentary crustaceans who currently have oversight of the service would have a fit, if we were seen to be holding official and cordial dialogue with anyone of a European flavour. Again, my advice is to volunteer nothing. Do nothing. I can shield you, I think."

"But how, George? How do we play this?"

"Wait your mother out, then go to France, go deep. And stay there."

"Won't they expect you to come after me and winkle me out? That might be rather fun, actually. I'd enjoy that."

"As would I."

"But what is it they think they have over me that would compel me?"

"They think you're in love with me, and will do anything for me."

She laughs. "But that's ridiculous! Sorry, that came out a lot crueller than I intended. I mean, they didn't consider the fact I simply felt it was the right thing to do?"

"As regards a person's motivations, I presume they rank altruism very low down. Greed and lust, the base motivations are the usual drivers. Love at a pinch. But altruism? Ours is not that sort of world any more."

"Oh, George, this is such a shame. We could get along, you and I. At any other time and place we could have been really good for one another. I do intend going to France, looking up my father's family, his old friends if they're still around. I miss the language, the culture. You must come. Seriously, I would love that. But as for a spy... I'm pretty much done. As I thought you were."

"Indeed I am. I mean I was... I think."

"Then you'll come? You'll winkle me out, one day? Promise? And we'll hide from your friends in deepest France. Drink wine and go deliriously native."

"I shall. Promise." But even as I say it, I am beginning to doubt it.

"Of course you probably have lots of other things going on."

"There are a few matters at hand, but which shouldn't detain me for ever... at least I hope not. Elaine, would you have dinner with me tonight, at my hotel?"

"Ooh... are you sure? Do you remember what happened the last time we dined together?"

"Indeed I do."

"Then I'd be delighted."

We part with a peck on the cheek, and a squeeze of the arm. Then she's gone, waving her goodbyes. Dinner at eight! Except there is something in the mood of the day, in the glower of the sky and the sting of the sand. Were I to read all of this as one might the Tarot, I would be turning up the grim reaper, and concluding something was at an end, and to be let go of.

Like all seaside towns, the paint they used to hide last season's peeling paint is also now coming off, and the ebb tide is revealing the increasingly unavoidable truth that Albion is drowning in its own shit. Sewerage discharge is more profitable than sewerage treatment, and in a deregulated economy, profit trumps everything.

The sand blowing in my face is most likely heavy with pathogens. The thought makes me shudder.

I venture briefly along the main street, find it half boarded. Of the rest there are a few cheap boozers flying Union Jacks. There is also a Kebab house, and a Turkish barber. I remember Tamara's request that I tidy my hair, so I venture in. She was right. To make a show benefits ourselves as much as others, and I feel considerably better when I emerge, but much less like a lover than I'd imagined I would. Then it's a shower at the hotel, clean white shirt, shiny shoes, and I sit in the window of my room with a G+T from the minibar, while I count down to the allotted hour.

While I wait, I send Winona a reminder to ditch the current burner, to collect a fresh one from the convenience store to where I have had it delivered. She makes back with a smiley face and a thumbs up. I am wondering if I should remind her also of the contingency envelope in the safe, on the boat, but I do not want to alarm her. Self analysis reveals the darkening of my mood began with meeting Elaine's mother, an unexpected twist, and though I thought I had risen above her, I fear the effort has triggered something in me. All I know is I do not presently feel like a man who is about to dine with a beautiful woman, as a prelude to making love.

Half asleep, now, I slip into that state which is neither here nor there, and find Mr Williams sitting in the corner of the room, white suited, quite dapper. He is showing me a photograph he took, holding it out. It is the last of the cards he drew that time in the red room. Here he's saying, let me remind you of this.

I know, Mr Williams. It's the King of Wands. It is the man in full possession of himself. It is the man with the plan, the mission, the assignment. It is the man who leads, who takes the initiative. He is the saviour of his friends, the safe pair of hands, and he is the man who takes the fight to his enemies.

If only it was true and the King of Wands is who I really am.

"So then who am I, Mr Williams? Who am I really?"

He raises the Voigtländer to his eye, focuses on me, and takes his shot, a portrait of a man.

Three shots, actually. Click. Click. Click. They are brackets at varying exposures, revealing both the light and the dark of me.

What is my situation, please? Out of what is it born? Where does it lead? And, regardless of who I am, or what I am, be it King,

Queen, Knave, or Fool, what role do I play?

We ask the cards, lay them on the table.

First card: The three of wands. The situation is born of conflict, an element of emotion, there being three swords piercing a heart. I fancy two of the hearts are Winona, and Elaine, for both of whom I feel a deep affection, and the third will be Tamara, for whom I realise I do feel something, though more in the gut than the heart. But what? What do I feel? Call it compassion if you like, or regret she should have to live the way she does, I mean in the service of others who know nothing of her, not even her real name, and wouldn't care if they did.

Second card: Five of Wands. The situation becomes a fight, a clash. Elements are coming together in haphazard fashion, parties jostling for advantage. It is an unseemly affair, a bar-brawl, with sticks. I speak metaphorically, or course. Yes, I don't need to be reminded of this, but the first two cards at least suggest the Tarot and I are in accord. So, finally...

Third card: My role is the eight of wands. The wands are all lined up neat, plans in place, an element of travel, of wands in flight, either physically, or psychologically. In other words this is my story. The neatness of my plans thus far leaves much to be desired, of course. Indeed I lack all certainty, that is until descending the stairs to dinner, with the cards still on my mind, and coming upon Elaine who is seated in the bar.

She wears a blue dress, and a twinkle in her eye that puts me in some ways on edge. Indeed, something moves in me. There is an alignment of sorts, but then it jars.

So, George, what to say? "You look lovely, Elaine."

"Thank you."

A tree falls alone in the forest. It makes no sound. The universe is as we experience it through the senses. Without us there is no universe. The scent of Elaine, the candlelight lending a soft shimmer to the highlights in her hair, the ring of our wine glasses as we touch them to each other. In toast to what? We do not say. The taste – velvety, warm, a strong wine. She will not be driving home, I think. There is anticipation therefore, of love, but not to be rushed. It is to be breathed deep, and taken down to the depths of the soul that we might stop time. And yet, I can't shake this odd sense of calamity. Then I note her hand is shaking.

"Elaine, forgive me, but... is everything all right?"

I don't think she's heard me, her mind elsewhere, her gaze far away. "Do you think mother will haunt me?" she asks.

"I don't know. Why do you ask? Anyway, I'm sure we're a long way from having to think about that..."

"She died this evening. "

"What? Oh... that was... sudden..."

"They telephoned as I was driving over."

"Then... perhaps we should save the wine for later. I mean... shouldn't we... shouldn't you be..."

"No. In the morning, George." She is very firm about this. "Time enough to be facing all of that in the morning."

"Well... as you wish. I'm deeply sorry, Elaine. Naturally, if there's anything I can do to help in the coming days... I'm not planning on rushing back."

"Thank you, George. I would deeply appreciate your support. Would you mind also... if I stayed the night?"

Obviously, we are not talking "lovers" now, just company. "Of course I don't mind."

Death brings with it many legal obligations. There are people to inform, enquiries into the extent of personal pension provision, enquiries of the state, the procurement of certification to the certainty of one's demise, then registrations, dealings with those professional conveyors of the dead across the misty waters of the Styx. As a lawyerly clerk, Elaine is more well versed than most of us, in such proceedings. Still, if I can be of any assistance, even if only as chauffeur...

I wonder briefly who shall deal with my own affairs, when the time comes. It's not a problem I need worry about of course, but something in me rebels against the idea of my simply being erased by those who once employed me.

She drains her glass. "We may need another bottle," she says, as indeed we might, and at hotel prices too. But then Tamara is paying. I hope she believes she is getting her money's worth.

Chapter Forty

The French Connection

In which we meet Elaine's aunt, and her cousin, Jacques, who we remember from earlier times. The coincidence does not go unchallenged, nor do its possibilities go unexplored. So...

Here we are, then. An unexpected turn up. Elaine makes a good show. She is composed, but hurting, a slow, but smouldering kind of hurt, deep and genuine. I am glad to lend what assistance I can, if only because it is the gentlemanly thing to do. It is not a grand affair, the funeral, I mean. In the pre Covid days all and sundry were invited to such events – weddings too – but the pandemic years have taught us we can manage equally well with close family, and bugger the rest. There is also the cost of these things to consider, and most of the nation is now, after all, on rather a tight budget. A wedding or a funeral, as we might once have held them, would bankrupt even the middle classes now.

I do not attend the funeral itself, for June would likely not have approved my presence. In our brief time together, even had she lived longer, we clearly had no harmonious future, and it seemed proper I respected her feelings, perverted as they were by an all too common, unfocussed hatred. But anyway, all told, I am at my leisure in the hotel for longer than I anticipated, and pleasantly so, my budget being catered for by you, dear taxpayer. I am unable to contact Tamara to warn her of a hefty billing, but am furnished with a credit card for said purposes, and am determined to enjoy it. I shall suffer her wrath when the time comes.

Other than Elaine, June had no surviving blood family, or at least none that would own her, so it was left to the French, Elaine's father's side, to make up the modest numbers, this I presume in support of Elaine, since June's Francophobic reputation was by all accounts well known, so I doubt she courted many admirers across the Channel either. And of the said French contingent there is but a slender, aged aunt, accompanied by a polished son of middle years, this being Elaine's cousin. And, since they have chosen to stay at the same hotel, on my recommendation, I host them for dinner.

Conversation is genial.

The aunt is very sweet, looks twenty years younger than her supposed eighty, dresses fashionably, carries herself well. Her

English is not so polished, but charmingly broken – far less broken however than my French. The cousin, Jacques, speaks eloquently of course, and flawlessly, as would befit an interpreter working out of the embassy. However, I know this to be but one of his talents, and he knows that I know though, naturally, neither of us comment on the fact.

Life sometimes throws up the oddest coincidence. I suppose I am well travelled, and have made many casual contacts over the years, and filed them away for future reference. So it's perhaps inevitable I should bump into one or the other of them now and again. I remember him from a dinner in Cologne, oh... some time in the early noughties – post 9/11, but pre Operation Telec, I think. A quiet chap, I thought, then, somewhat new to the game, but clearly capable of rising through its ranks. We talked briefly, exchanged pleasantries, remembered each other's names, looked them up in the files when we got back to the office.

So, we do not acknowledge that we know one another, at least not in the presence of the ladies. It's only when the aunt shows signs of tiredness, and Elaine takes her up to her room, Jacques and I repair to the lounge and face each other in easy chairs. I order whiskies, and we each wait for the other to take the first sip.

"So... George. Elaine tells me you have been very kind these past weeks. I am grateful to you. Thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome. Least I could do, Jacques. Very unfortunate and all that... you have my condolences of course."

He offers a wry smile by way of inviting me into his confidence. "Had you met my aunt June?"

"Just the once, though of course her reputation preceded her. To be frank, I don't think she thought very much of me."

He laughs softly, politely. "Well, I would not take it personally. She felt that way about everyone. Confidentially, it will be a big relief for Elaine, and I am happy for her."

"Oh, yes. Indeed. As am I, Jacques."

"So... what will she do now, do you think?"

"She's talked about making her home in France, speaks very fondly of Annency and her family there. It's a lovely part of the world, and England is... well, rather a bleak place these days. Perhaps it always was, but seems lately to have embraced its own cliche somewhat."

"You have been to Annency?"

"Many years ago. As a tourist."

Jacques is studying me, wondering if he can risk playing the game more openly. Ah... yes, I see he's going to go for it. Curious coincidence, all of this. Don't you think? Anyway, he turns his glass through ninety degrees, but does not drink, looks me squarely in the eye: "You remember me, perhaps, George?"

"Indeed I do, Jacques. Cologne. I regret I forget the precise year. You're... still with the, em... bureau?"

"I am, George. And you are retired, I hear?"

I wonder where he heard it. Elaine perhaps? What else did she tell him? "And enjoying every minute, Jacques."

"I am glad to hear it. You have known Elaine long?"

"Not long. She did the legals on my deceased father's estate, earlier this year. Then we discovered we were neighbours. A long story, and quite a coincidence, but anyway, we've become friends. At least I hope she can think of me as a friend."

"I'm sure she can, George." He leans forward, is tempted to drink, but checks himself, grows more serious, more confidential in his tone." There was an incident, I think. An *accident*. You were injured... forgive me if I speak out of turn, but many of us in diplomatic service took an interest at the time for fear of something similar happening to us."

"As I can well imagine. Indeed, I was injured, as you say, though, sadly we still don't know the exact cause. Or if we do, I'm not on the circulation, so to speak, though I was adequately pensioned and advised to drink the waters of the Lethe. Which I have done, copiously, and enjoyed enormously, I must say."

Jacques nods. I wonder, of course, if it is possible Jacques is not really the cousin. I wonder if it is possible the aunt is not really the aunt. I wonder if it is possible June is not actually dead, that indeed there never was a June, a mother. Forgive me this flight of fancy, but we are expected to think the unexpected, the unthinkable, the impossible. Could Tamara be wrong, and Elaine is very much a player, and I am the target of an elaborate – what's the word – illusion? Sting? It's a fascinating scenario. Possibly true. More, I find I would like it to be true, though of course it is more likely a delusion, perhaps even a little paranoid. My instinct is rarely pointing in completely the wrong direction, though. So...

I wonder what Jacques is thinking, to find his cousin in the company of a man he knows to have been in the employ of the

British "diplomatic" services. What might I be wanting from her, really? What use might I be thinking he can be for me? What use can I be for him? For such is the measure of all transactions in our line of work.

"But you are quite well, now? You do look very well, George."

Oh dear, does he mean for my age?

"Thank you, Jacques. I still have my off days – balance and cognition, you know? The memory seems to be returning very well, but is curiously selective, and idiosyncratic in what it chooses to place emphasis upon. However, I doubt I could work under the same pressures again. And you? You're still working as a translator? Do I recall that correctly?"

"Indeed. I still work as a translator."

Jacques wears his suit well, with a casual brilliance, and room to manoeuvre. Mine is too tight, too starched, too stiff. Always was. But he is no longer a translator. He is far more involved in the running of affairs, or at least he was when his file last crossed my desk.

Pause... we are out of runway, now. We both smile into the momentary silence, he considers his drink, is tempted again, but notes I make no reciprocal move. He has good presence of mind, is only momentarily distracted. "Ha... but your government these days, eh George?..."

"Indeed. Our former friends in Europe must find it all deeply puzzling."

"Oh, you still have friends in Europe, George. We regret BREXIT very much of course. It was always more fun with the British at the table, and we would love to wangle a way of bringing you back into play."

"We did have fun, didn't we?... still... we are where we are."

"Of course there is talk of a leadership challenge soon," he ventures.

"There is? Not another one, surely? I regret I don't follow politics very much these days."

"Well, at least this is the feeling on our side. As early as next year, we predict. And then, who knows? A general election to follow seems certain, given such a shaky mandate. And the mood is shifting, an awareness among the leave voters they were sold a dud."

"I shall have to take your word for it. Though I doubt it can

make much difference to our predicament. As for the EU question, I doubt it will be revisited for a generation, or more."

He laughs politely. Why is he telling me this? What does he think I might know? "But surely... you cannot go on as you are."

"Oh, well, let's see... how far is down, Jacques? We have both seen it in other places."

"But a Western Democracy, such as ours?"

I shrug. What else does he expect me to say? France will follow soon enough. Germany will be last.

Another pause. Deep breath, here it comes: "George, is Elaine of interest to you?"

"Em... meaning?"

"Professionally. As for personally, this is none of my business. I ask only because I'm obviously aware of your past associations, and now I find you here... with Elaine."

Of course I should counter this professionally with a question such as: *and why do you think Elaine would be of interest?* but discover I cannot be bothered. "I'll be frank with you, Jacques. Elaine was able to assist us in one small matter of interest, as you say. I middle-manned that particular thing. But it's my intention to see to it she is under no further obligation."

What have I just told him? That Elaine has assisted the British authorities, that – retired as I am and contrary to my earlier indications – I am still involved with those same authorities, that I claim to be able to protect her from further obligation, whether I can or cannot, and most likely cannot. And what has he told me? That he knows more about me than one might expect for a man I have not seen for such a long time, also that I am of ongoing interest to his people, though why, I cannot imagine. And he has an interest in politics, which of course narrows down his current department, and renders him of sudden and acute interest also to me. And he shows up quite by coincidence, at Elaine's mother's funeral.

"Thank you, George. I'm pleased Elaine was able to assist your friends – naturally I do not ask in what capacity – but I would not like her to be troubled further."

"Nor would I, Jacques. And I mean that most sincerely."

"Then we understand one another?"

"Indeed we do."

We catch sight of Elaine descending the stairs. Thus our brief

tête-à-tête comes to a close. He slips me his card. "Forgive me, but I sense many troubling undercurrents in you, George. If I can be of any assistance, let me know."

I am to protect Elaine in return for his unspecified favours, or at least the threat of his unspecified wrath, even to the extent of betraying my own country. Then again, of course, and entirely counter to this, I am to recruit Elaine, in return for Tamara's favours in helping protect Winona, if I can believe that, and sadly I do not. And failing *that*, will be Tamara's wrath, which I have yet to test. As for what he can do for me, an image is forming in my mind. It’s huge, and quite frightening. But all of this is far too complicated to take in as a whole, so we don't try. We swallow it down instead, follow it with a good measure of the whisky, and, as Nikki would say, we allow that silent part of us to work upon it while we deal with the simpler business of the day to day.

Elaine smiles. "So, which of you gentlemen is going to buy me a drink?"

Jacques is the first to his feet. We laugh. I like him. But, again, that does not mean I trust him. The only reassurance I have is that if Elaine does decamp to France, he will see to it she is protected.

Chapter Forty One

Partners

In which we travel to Oxfordshire with Tamara, and embark upon a country house mystery. Tamara reveals an almost human side at last, which endears me to her. So...

"We think too much and feel too little."

Who said that?

Was it Krishnamurti?

Think, George. Think! It might be important! Ah... no, it was Charlie Chaplin, in The Great Dictator. Oh... we daren't make movies like that any more.

The back-room machinery subverting the state, the armed forces, the security services, suppressing dissent, family members coerced into betrayal of one another, the appointment of a suitably vulnerable minority as target for orchestrated choirs of a daily hate... all of this is to come, before Albion can rise again. The prospect appals me, not that I shall see the other end of it myself, but your children might, if they are lucky, and if not, we will have destroyed ourselves in the process.

"You all right, George?"

"Hmm? Oh... just thinking, pondering this and that... you know?"

Where are we, now?

M6. Southbound. Potholes. Mile after mile of abandoned warehouses.

I had hoped to spend a little more time with Winona, thought we could perhaps tease the boat past Middleton together, moor up near Riley Green, the Dales then being but a heartbeat away. Of course there is no rational reason Middleton should have become such a barrier to progress, no pebble eyed men assailing us from the towpaths. But still, it did not feel like a safe thing to do, I mean mentally. So, here I am in that black boss-class people-carrier, with Tamara. We are in the fast lane. The driver is plugged in to the machine's iron brain, and flashes his lights self importantly to clear the way.

She is business suited and leggy, relaxed, flipping through paper documents in buff folders. This seems a little "last century". Buff folders, I mean, and paper docs. But they are also hack-proof, and

rival agencies are becoming unskilled in the arts of non digital intelligence work. Sometimes the future lies in the past. Have you noticed? We are seated diagonally opposite one another. Up front it is, I believe, one of her usual minders who drives, though they all look alike to me. The other, cast from the same ex military mould, rides shot-gun.

"You were snoring," she says. "I hope you won't be snoring tonight."

Ah... that...

Let me summarise for you where we are, and contrast that with where we merely appear to be. Firstly, the latter. We appear to be embroiled in the business of the profane, the business of appearances, what the wise men of the east still call Maya, yet which these people pursue breathlessly, and by so doing perpetuate it *ad nauseum*. They chase whatever seems important today, yet which will be forgotten tomorrow when some newly consequent urgency replaces it. And yes... yes, I know these urgencies do involve occasional life and death – lives spared, at the cost of others lost. That used to be my business, and I am increasingly worried I am at risk of being sucked back in.

But I have long been unconvinced my role in this world achieved anything, and I challenge any of my fellows to say theirs did. We spared bombings and other outrages in the home cities, certainly, but taken in the round, the body count of the innocent, across all nations remains unchecked. The suffering of mankind in the round, is indeed immense. The existentialists and the post modern, and those ever so chillingly western scientistic thinkers tell us it is a suffering entirely without purpose, and though it is a premise that is difficult to argue against with reason, it is nevertheless a premise against which all sane men must recoil.

Do I proselytise too much? Skip ahead if I bore you, for we have yet to see Tamara naked, and I promise you she is a looker! Still, when you have seen one comely woman disrobed, you have seen them all. To know them is another matter. And, we shall never know Tamara.

Where were we? Ah, yes... but to recoil, as I did, long ago, against that premise of the existentialists, one is then set upon a course, which leads to a particular revelation regarding the nature of the universe, the cosmos if you will, even to God, if you are so inclined. Yet, as I have repeated over and over, thus far, it is one thing to have the nature of things so revealed, quite another to

know for sure that it is true.

So this is where we are, *really are*, I mean.

Then again, even if one does not quite trust in that truth, the journey towards it, even the first step, leaves one changed, so one becomes a ghost, or rather we become aware of our own ghostliness in the churn of Maya. Thus things take on meanings at odds with what they appear to mean, I mean according to the rules by which others play. Thus, I am challenged to protect the life of a young woman, one I am not to love, nor win in sexual conquest for my troubles. Of those women I am presented with, and whom I might know in that way, indeed *have* known, whilst I feel a curious, though genuine affection, I feel an equally curious lack of genuine desire. This may simply be my age, and the result of past disappointments, but I don't think so. It is, in large part, a result of that path I walk, the path of the adept, the monk, the fool. And, occasionally, the magician.

Winona is the key, then. She is the key, not to revealing the nature of things, for I already know them. She is the key that opens a door to a permanent and visceral acceptance of the truth, that you, and I, and she are *it*.

There are those who walk the earth who all know this for certain, and those who don't and never shall. Those who truly know it are perhaps a handful, and are scorned for it. They sit naked outside of the ashrams, faces painted white with burned cow dung,...

The driver blares his horn at a stubborn fast-lane hogger. It jolts me rudely back only to where we appear to be.

Where were we?...

"Must your man drive so aggressively, Tamara?"

"You want to tell him how to drive? I've read his file, and, personally, I'd rather not. Anyway he's not my man, as you put it. Neither of them are. Different department. Different reporting structure entirely."

"And their brief, dare I ask?"

"Get us in, get us out. Preferably alive."

"You make it sound like a hostile deployment."

"An alien environment, certainly. Hostile possibly. All politicians are hostile to the security services, unless they think they can be subverted to their own ends."

"Ah, then our future must lie in allowing them to believe that

this is so."

She smiles. "You're a cunning old dog, George. Are you sure we can't tempt you back into the fold?"

"Thank you, no. I'm not cunning enough, for that."

She closes the folder she's reading from, sets it aside. "So, tell me: how did it go with Elaine?"

"I told you. Her mother died. She's making plans to go to France."

"But apart from that, *how did it go*?"

"I'm, sorry if I overstayed. I know I spent a fortune on hotels, and food and wine."

"Oh, George, who cares? *How did it go*?"

Really? That went down better than I expected.

"We're not actually going to sleep together, are we? You're just teasing me with that, aren't you? You're bound to find me terribly pedestrian, and I should be embarrassed to see you without your clothes. Really, I find it awfully tiresome your keeping on at me like this. And thank God I never married."

"Your feeble attempt to change the subject is duly noted. I take it Elaine is a lost cause. We'll set that one on the back burner, then. You seem tetchy this morning. Let's not squabble. I am on your side, after all."

"Not if you could read my mind you wouldn't be."

"Don't be an ass. A part of you is glad you're here. It gives you a sense of purpose."

"You've no idea what my purpose is, Tamara."

"Yes I have. The first time we met, you saw right through me, yet you played along. You played with me, and enjoyed every minute. And for that matter, so did I."

She has a point. At least in part, then... "This is true. So?"

"So if, you're not dead by the time I retire, I swear I shall make an honest man out of you, and we shall both pretend we are God's gift to one another, disappear to a Grecian Isle, and make love until the sun burns out."

"Ha! Perhaps in some strange perverted heaven, that would work. But, long before then I suspect one of us is going to be standing at the other's graveside."

"So what's your plan? How do you propose escaping from me in thirty seconds?"

"Like I'd tell you. What's yours?"

"Well, too late for that, darling. Speaking of which, this is probably the last opportunity we'll have of talking openly. We have to assume everything we say, once we arrive, is listened to. So if there's anything indiscreet you need to get off your chest?"

"No... I'm fine. I understand. Once we step out of this car, I shall take my lead from you, and ad-lib as best I can."

"Including in the bedroom, darling?"

"As for that, I suggest you feign a headache, and we both get an early night. Because if you don't, I shall."

"All right. But just in case you weren't listening, earlier, or you didn't believe me, I repeat, whatever strangeness goes down this weekend, I am on your side."

Chapter Forty Two

The Pirate Ship

In which we meet the fragrant corpses who preside over the death of Albion in the name of revivifying it along the lines of the eighteenth century. And Tamara and I repair to our rooms for, as she says, a quick shag before dinner. So...

There is major security at the gate, and I mean State visit level: armed, masked, and heavily militarised police. I try to remember when it was, exactly, Albion adopted these carapaced creatures to man its checkpoints, and police its riots. There is a temptation, when they peer into the vehicle, to assume what one believes to be the most harmless expression. I resist it. A stone face is best. Tamara makes daggers, but then she has the presence to get away with it. We are waved on.

It's a mansion house, set in more acres of green than a large town, also and somewhat paradoxically, easy to isolate, secure and defend, which makes it a favourite for grand gatherings of this nature. It is of the Georgian period, straight from the pages of a Jane Austen novel, paid for by trade in slaves and opium. Ownership is still in the founding family, so to speak, the present patriarch still a member of the ruling class – not in government, but influential within it by means of its purchase through the smoke and mirrors of think-tank skullduggery. It is one of the few such houses not open to the public, and my presence here might be considered therefore a privilege. It certainly was, once upon a time, and probably still is, among the more junior ranks of the service, whose enthusiasms are not yet abraded by their years of experience.

Our luggage is extracted from the boot at the gate-house without permission, and trundled away for inspection by x-ray. It will appear in our room(s) in due course, after we have enjoyed the champagne and canapé reception. Said reception is held in an elegant ballroom, replete with sprung floor, ornate mirrors and grand artworks depicting the glories of Albion on the world's stage: Redcoats, charge of horses, sabres glinting in the sunlight... muck and bullets, and all that.

Sir Joshua is quick to find us as we stand somewhat bashfully on the periphery of the hee-hawing throng.

"Tamara!"

"Ah... darling!" They hug as near as possible without touching, then air-kiss. "You remember George?"

"George. What a pleasure, old boy." A vigorous handshake emphasises the bonhomie. "We're all looking forward to your input, tomorrow."

Input? What input? Am I to be presenting? Tamara didn't brief me along those lines... ah... no wait... he means to unsettle me. Ooh, very sharp! Did I let it show? No, I was always good at that, a permanent expression of expectant pleasure, and an eagerness to please.

"Only too glad to help out, Sir Joshua. Point me in the direction of a microphone and I can waffle with the best of them!"

Too flippant, perhaps? No... I think I judged it about right.

The wife looks on from the sidelines. I recognise her from the photograph in the briefing notes Tamara saw fit to briefly grace me with. But what Tamara does not know is that I already know her, having done my own research, both online and via those redoubtable British tomes: Debretts, and Who's Who. She is a lady of middle years, long blonded hair and watchful eyes. She is also rather beautiful, dressed in plain couture, daughter of one of England's oldest landed families, and with whom I had a brief acquaintance – the service does get one into all manner of nooks and crannies. Acquaintance, you ask? Well, we were colleagues of a sort, and we danced together, once. I wonder if she remembers? Naturally, I do not need to share this information with Tamara.

She is Sara, Lady Sara, father a baronet who ruined himself at the tables in Monte Carlo. She made a pragmatic marriage to Malone, new money, and lots of it, only a smidgen being from honest means, of course, but widely known, and yet which did not trouble her. She observes the air kissing with the stillness of an owl, and does not approach, but from her expression, I surmise she knows the game well enough, that I am chaff. No, I don't think she recognises me. After all, we were very young then, and laughed a lot – at the absurdity of our work, at the dangers inherent in it. Why do we laugh no more, I wonder? Is it that the world has crushed us? Perhaps that then is my aim to learn how to laugh with life again, how to fly.

But for that to happen, I need to *believe*.

On a more practical level, one might think it would not take much to ruin Malone, that she is his very obvious Achilles heel, and

I did briefly consider something along those lines. But it is more than his money she is attracted to, and of those things that do attract her, I suspect it is least of all, him. It is rumoured he is negotiating the building of a doomsday bunker in New Zealand. I wonder, will they be buried in it along with their servants, like latter day Pharaohs.

Malone is quick to move on, leaving Tamara and me to mingle. We do not venture far, indeed we venture only a few steps to find all eyes averted and resistant to hob-nobbing. We are clearly "trade", and not worth the small talk. Actually, I had thought my new suit rather a fine one, and I do hope the service allows me to keep it. It is the equal of any here, and one can only wonder what mysterious vibration it is that marks us a lowly serfs. Tamara of course is similarly well attired, and an infinitely superior actress, but clearly finds the audience stubbornly cold.

The wallflowers are security, and rather obviously so, as they observe the floor awash with money and influence, the poor starving at the gates, or if not the gates exactly, then certainly the nearest town, where there are reports of school children eating erasers to stave off the pains of hunger.

We have several ministers of state, including, I note, my very own codename Fishbrain. He is leaping from one group to another, with chortles of delight at his own bad jokes. He was embarrassing enough to keep company with from the distance of his files. In the flesh he is a curious caricature of foolishness and bonhomie, from which one would never guess his off-duty vices, which are egregious to say the least, and would certainly disbar him from office, were they but more widely known. That they are not, speaks volumes of the obsequiousness of the presses.

Then there are a couple of old spooks from my day, iced smiles and dead eyes, and, since an old spook never forgets a face, I suppose they recognise mine, but professional courtesy dictates they do not acknowledge my presence, even if they feel so inclined, which I suspect they do not.

There are captains of industry, these having a distinct aroma of pharmaceuticals about them, also private healthcare, circling the carcass of Albion's moribund Public Health Services. And of course we have the peripheral crooks, spivs, and spinning hacks.

"So, George, have you twigged the theme of our little gathering yet?"

"Some big guns here. They wouldn't all be pointing at the health service would they?"

"They might."

"My, how you flit about, Tamara. From land, to health..."

"Big money in health. It is the last frontier of the old social contract. We are shaping the future, George."

"I don't know about shaping. I see it more like helplessly bearing witness to it. Strange though: selling it off and transforming it into a mirror of the American system. It would make it an outlier, and a model the Europeans are unlikely to follow."

"You think?"

"I do."

"Awfully difficult to get a GP appointment, have you noticed? And I imagine hospital waiting lists are a couple of years by now. It would be a nightmare if I wasn't covered by the firm. The monetisation of sickness is so much better for everyone, don't you think?"

"From the way you say that, I gather you don't actually believe it. For myself it's probably a little late to be worrying. Should my health descend into a critical condition, I've made other arrangements."

"Well, no one can blame you for going private, George."

"No, I have a cyanide pill, once gifted to me by a chap from the CIA. Pleasant fellow, though rather a macabre sense of humour. I hope it works, and he wasn't pulling my leg. It's probably just a peppermint. I shall be most disappointed."

"Oh, you're such a wag. But don't be so defeatist. The good ship Britannia is not sunk yet. Just look at all the money here." She is being ironic, and it endears me to her, reminds me I don't know her at all, and that it would be unwise to judge her either way.

"Keep talking, my love. This could be the start of a beautiful relationship. But it's no longer a White Star Liner, is it? More of a pirate ship, by the looks of this lot. Jolly Rogers flying all over the place."

We still seem not to be attracting much attention and every tentative opening Tamara imagines is rebuffed with a turned back before she has moved in its direction. She looks impatient of a sudden, even a little crestfallen as if she had been expecting a more central casting. In spite of her professional calling, which demands a certain concealment, she really is quite the party girl, preferring, I

suppose, concealment in full view.

"Where's this bloody champagne, then?" she snaps.

"I'll go find some shall I?" And I take off in search.

The drinks are arrayed on a table in the centre of the room, one of them has been spilled and the formerly pristine cloth is now soiled red with wine like a massive bloodstain. Staff are gathered wondering how best to deal with it. I rescue a couple of glasses, and prepare to withdraw only to have my elbow tapped by one of the senior service morticians, now animated into a caricature of geniality.

"George, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Lightfoot's the name. We met at Larry's place some weeks ago... I wonder if you remember me."

"But of course! And how is dear Larry?"

"Oh, same old, same old, you know?"

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Indeed, indeed."

"But you know Larry. I'm sure he'll rally."

"Oh, no doubt..."

Of course I've no idea who Larry is, and all I know is this man is not called Lightfoot. The last time I saw him was probably in passing somewhere in the corridors of power, years ago. He did not acknowledge me then, but now, as suits the moment, we are old friends. Is he working as Tamara's man on the inside, or is he working some other gig altogether? How confusing.

"So, what's this I hear about you and Tamara? So pleased, old boy."

"Thank you. Quite the girl, isn't she."

He leans in, on pretence of examining my tie? "What club is that, old boy?" and then softly: "Careful, Swifty. Tread lightly. She's not the only one with tabs on Malone."

"Em... old school tie, actually."

Middleton comprehensive, and recently discovered among my father's keepsakes.

He smiles, drifts away, winks. Does that mean he's got my back, or he's about to stick a knife in it? I rejoin Tamara. She takes a greedy gulp, gestures with her glass. "So what did he want?"

"You know him?"

No, she does not know him, which worries me, and begs also the

question – one I have asked before: is Tamara more Malone's girl than she was ever Clive's? Indeed was she ever Clive's? Oh, come on, Swifty, this is no time to go all post modern. A tree falls alone, it makes no sound, but in this context, it doesn't really matter, for not a man among them would agree. Of course it makes a sound they'd say. Noise and bluster. That's all they know.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go check out our room."

"Shouldn't we be making more of an effort to mingle or something? I'm sure if we just..."

"No, darling. The gathering has already passed its judgement. We should be doing whatever is most expected of us."

"Which is?"

"Disappearing upstairs, for a quick shag before dinner."

Chapter Forty Three

Dinner with the Mandarins

In which we see Tamara naked, more or less. We endure dinner, converse with vultures and impotent mandarins. And we are cornered by Malone's wife. So...

It's a big room, first floor, tall ceilings, English Country House style, meaning drab, and cold, with spiders in every corner. Only the view from the bay-window – which is tall-glassed, archaically single-paned, and sumptuously draped – redeems it, the view being of manicured parkland *a la* "Capability" Brown.

"Your room's through there," she says, tipping her head towards an adjoining door. Then the impish smile: "You didn't think I was serious about us sleeping together, did you?"

"Well, one never knows with you, Tamara. Best always to err on the side of caution. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst and all that."

I don't know if I'm disappointed or not, but let's err on the side of... not. Elaine was most gentle in her lovemaking, and it is of considerable regret I am unlikely to see her again. I don't know why, but I imagine Tamara is rather more bestial.

The room, *her* room, is dominated by an ancient and somewhat overly palatial four poster, ostentatiously draped in dusty velour. She regards it now with an air of resignation. "I wonder how many have died in that," she says, then dismisses me.

"I'll knock for you at dinner."

Naturally my own room is rather small, I presume it having been some sort of cupboard at one time. More disconcerting though is the fact the connecting door seems too little of a barrier between my embarrassment and the potential of Tamara's bedroom noises, though I don't know why this should bother me, since I consider myself a man of the world. Still, I note with some relief, I have my own door of escape onto the landing, and am determined to use it should needs be.

There is also a French window with balcony, a table and chairs, for now uninvitingly saturated by recent rains, and the floor of it is also puddled. It has the same view as Tamara's room, and I suppose the balcony connects with hers. It's all very picture-book. Am I seduced by it? I would not be an Englishman if I were not, but that's

only because we dwell in the past, in glories that were but stories put about by historians and novelists, or at least those chosen to write the histories and the stories that we believe define us. The truth is somewhat different, always to be guessed at, witnessed only by those who do not matter, and do not write it down, or when they do it is rarely taken up for broadcast, and falls stillborn into the obscure.

The truth is a tin boat grounded in mud, it is a filthy, shuttered street in a former industrial town, where every winter the undertakers make busy bringing out the poor, and the old, dead from malnourishment, and hypothermia in this, at the time of writing, the fifth wealthiest nation in the world. It's all but impossible to find the goodness that comes from an intelligence of the heart in any of that. I mean, where does one start? It provokes too much anger, too much resentment, too much expectation things can only get worse, that decline is inevitable, and accelerating, no matter how wealthy Albion appears on paper. I have seen it often enough in other nations, so is it only my decadence, and my exceptionalism that causes me to fret that it should be happening here.

I pass an hour in silent repose upon the bed, watching the light drain from the sky. I contemplate visiting the red room, but sense I might be interrupted at any moment. Anyway, Mr Williams cannot help me here, trapped as I am in this dungeon of illusion. Some things the ego must grapple with alone, even if it is only the notion of its own inadequacy. Regarding other matters I suppose The Lady Lucy will not be charging very well at this late season. Winona reports she has enough smokeless for the stove to last several winters, and tells me to stop fussing. I hope she is safe. We should perhaps have changed the name of the boat. It would have been easy enough to over-paint the "Lucy", turn it into "Luck".

The Lady Luck.

She's right. I do fuss. When I am sure she is safe, as I seem to keep saying, the next challenge will be to let her go.

Ah... there, you see? a knock at the dividing door, though we are still an hour from dinner.

"Help zip my dress, George?"

Hmm.

I find her wearing nothing, and must suppress the shock of it. The dress is draped over a chair-back. She has a foot on the seat

and she bends, painting her toenails.

"You're not going down to dinner like that are you? You'll catch your death."

She stands for me then, hands on hips, breasts jutting. I see the scar on her abdomen. It's not always polite to ask about these things, but I don't know what else to say, and I will not have her think she has taken my breath – even though she has. It's ever such a long time since I saw so comely a woman undressed. The scar is neither an appendectomy, nor a caesarian.

"So, where did you get that?"

"What? Oh... that was Delhi. Years ago. Stabbed with a six inch nail of all things. Missed the aortic artery by millimetres, they say. I was a bit green in those days. Didn't see it coming. I'd like to think I'm a bit quicker now."

"Hell, Tamara... is all this really worth dying for?"

"Oh, don't be soft, George. It's not a bad life. Better than churning out babies for some Hooray Henry, which is pretty much the only other alternative for posh girls from old and skint families like mine."

"That's not true. You girls, posh or otherwise, can do whatever you want. And I know for a fact you'd never have been recruited if your IQ was less than a hundred and forty five, which makes you clever as well as posh. So, what you lack in patriarchal authority, you more than make up for with cunning."

"Yes, well... nice of you to say so." She gives me a twirl. "Do I look all right?"

"You look lovely, Tamara. Now shall we try it again, but with the dress on?"

Dinner is noisy, hot and interminable. Tamara and I are not seated at the same table. Instead, I find myself with a Treasury mandarin, who is an elective mute, also representatives of various private corporations, who I learn will be presenting at the conference tomorrow. Their pitches they reveal, with alarmingly unguarded candour, to be thinly veiled marketing. Lucrative contracts are up for grabs: doctors, nurses, laboratory services, and so far as I can gather, all at twice the price the health service might do for itself, were it allowed to. There is money to be made, and they are excited by the prospect. I am charming and attentive, learn much of the present state of the dubious art of extracting shareholder value, *a la* Milton Friedman. Even they who broke it,

don't seem to know it's broken.

Meanwhile I play up my role, enjoy the fit of my suit, the crispness of my starched white shirt, the secret joke of my old comprehensive school tie, my practised air of studious concentration. Really,... conferences are easy. They simply require grit, and pretence.

And you George? What do you do?

Oh... I'm with the Home Office. Department of internal affairs and budgetary responsibility.

Internal affairs sounds a bit "legal" and "budgetary responsibility" sounds very stern, very head-masterish. It makes them cagey. Business, at least as they are taught it, is rather close to the edge of legality, and they know it. Subjects are cautiously changed. The mandarin graces me with a smile. He is one of the wise, who used to keep us on the straight and narrow. I don't know how they got to him exactly, but he's beyond saving us now. Like me, all he's thinking about is his pension. Its the young I feel sorry for – this being the usual refrain of those waking up too late to their voting record. But Winona's the only one I've half a chance of saving. The rest of you are on your own.

The after-dinner speech is given by a sportsman, made famous for the malicious wounding of another sportsman on the field, and narrowly avoiding prosecution. He is erudite and witty, displays the right stuff, this being a wafer from misogyny and racism, all of which has the tables roaring with approval. The mandarin and I reserve judgement. As the dinner breaks up, we exchange chin up-nods of parting recognition: fellow travellers, each bound for our own sunsets.

I catch a glimpse of Tamara in her little black dress, the one I helped zip up, my fingers brushing the soft warmth of her skin as I did so. The softness surprised me. I imagined her made of iron. She is wearing no knickers, tells me they always get in the way at the last minute, though why she should feel the need to try to shock me like that I don't know. Men have been chastised for a long time for demeaning women, and with some justification, but I still find myself saddened when a woman feels she must demean herself in order to get what she wants. Perhaps it is this last surviving antiquarian trait in me that she gently mocks.

It made me smile actually. She was right, as I recall. The nether-wear always did get in the way at the last minute, and no entirely

graceful way of divesting oneself of them.

She is with Malone now, and I must either look for alternative company or find a quiet hole to settle in, and am wondering if there are any remote corners of this place I can slink into without transgressing security, preferably with books. But then the old spook who calls himself Lightfoot floats up, again, and touches my elbow. I imagine he's about to speak, to enlighten me some more regarding both his presence here, and mine, but instead he taps the side of his nose, gives me a theatrically mysterious look, and floats on by.

Then: "Mr Swift?"

A lady in a long dress. Long, black hair, pale face, red lips: Lady Sara. Malone's wife.

"Ah... Ma'am?"

"I wonder if you remember me, George."

"Indeed, I do. I believe we danced, once. It was a party, Singapore, oh, early nineties."

I think I have confused her.

"I don't remember that," she says.

My advantage, then. "We were both a little tipsy."

She enters the game. "I hope I behaved myself."

"Oh, indeed, ma'am."

She was of the service, then, a junior role in Registry, one of those positions reserved for the daughters of well connected families – a personage of the right sort. She was young, pretty, single. Malone came later. And yes, I do not lie; I danced with her. I wonder if it's true and she really does not remember, for as I remember the registry girls were all of them very sharp, and did not need computers to locate even the smallest piece of information.

"Well, we might have been better off making a go of it that night," she says. "For it seems we are also now both well and truly cuckolded."

Ah. She chooses the path of candour. So, she really thinks Tamara and I are an item.

"Shall we find out what else we have in common?" she asks. "An interest in my husband's affairs, perhaps?"

She takes my arm, is slight, but warm, and scented of heaven. As if she had read my earlier thoughts regarding a library, she walks us away from the after-dinner party, and enters a silent room of books. We sit in armchairs before a window. The grounds are lit, distant

trees illumined for their architectural grace.

"Do you think it's true," she asks. "I mean, what they say about people starving, out there?"

A curious opening. "I do. Indeed, I know it to be true."

"You've seen it?"

"I've seen the queues outside the foodbanks. They call them pantries now. It's a less offensive word. Most towns have them, though I hear they're running out of supplies. Even the charities are falling on hard times."

"And what then?"

I shrug. The answer is obvious. "They will starve quicker, and in greater numbers."

She seems perplexed. "Can they not get work? I hear there are so many vacancies unfilled."

"These are working people, ma'am. However, most jobs, from the middle down, pay around the same these days, which is not enough to live the natural life. Even with several jobs, and working unhealthily long hours, the natural life is no longer possible."

"Natural?"

"A couple in love, wanting to live together, raise a family and feed oneself adequately to avoid illness."

"So why don't they rise up? Why aren't they angry?"

"Oh... to rise up? Well, it's not really in the English character. And any small pockets of dissent will be put down efficiently. Legislation against even modest dissent is impressively robust, these days. I think it is merely accepted as normal, and the blame effectively redirected at amorphous external causes, no matter how unlikely – at least by any rational analysis."

Yes, a strange segue, but I detect a genuine note of concern in her voice, not so much for the starving, but perhaps for her own safety, and the safety of her kind. Could it be that even they are now waking from the long dream of Albion, and realising, somewhat late in the day, it is in ruins, as I am realising my powerlessness, but also my complicity, mostly in the service of these people. I can help neither the starving at the gates, nor the growing fears of the gatekeepers. But I do not envy them their doomsday bunkers. If we wish to witness generosity, it is on the streets, among the poor, same as it always was.

"You used to keep company with that peculiar fellow Nikolas Crowne, didn't you?" she says.

Another curious turn. "Yes. You remember Nikki?"

"Everyone remembers Nikki. I always wondered how you survived scrutiny, when he went to ground."

"Well, I didn't. Not entirely. My cards were definitely marked thereafter. But we all accept the risk that sometimes the mother must sacrifice one of her children to spare the others."

Why is she asking about Nikki?

"I'm told he's in Copenhagen," she says. "Planning an elaborate revenge."

So, she wants to know where he is, wishes to curry favour with her old directorate perhaps. Is there still a hunger for morsels of intelligence on Nikki's whereabouts? Or were they lovers once? It wouldn't surprise me. Nikki was a devil for the office girls, and they loved him for it.

"Oh, that doesn't sound like Nikki, ma'am. I've always imagined him on a Greek isle somewhere, living with a girl half his age – or several girls – permanently drunk and deliriously happy."

One more skilled in the art of intelligence would leave it there, but she ploughs on. "I heard he was into the occult. That he was a magician."

Like your husband, do you mean?

Careful now, George. "I believe there was that side to him, yes."

"He never lured you down that path?"

Does she think I might be a potential ally of her husband then? One of his infernal brethren? Or am I one of Nikki's diabolic disciples, closing in for the kill?

"Ah, no. There are those who believe they can command the occult, bend it to their will, and Nikki was certainly one of them. But they always come unstuck, victims of their own hubris, or consumed by the demons they invoke, whichever you choose to believe. It's not a path I would ever wish for myself, ma'am."

"And what do you wish for yourself, George?"

Good question, and more apposite than she realises. "Oh, a simple life. The pursuit of self-knowledge." There we are, George. You have hit the nail upon the head!

"And Tamara?"

"A pretty dress, a lively party, and a glass of Champagne. That's Tamara." Tamara is infinitely more complicated of course, but I'm guessing Lady Sara would prefer the cliché.

"Doesn't sound like a marriage made in Heaven, then. I mean,

you and her."

"I'm under no illusions ma'am. We go day to day, and I count each a blessing." Too much perhaps?

"I'm under no illusions either, George. I know she's probably of the service. They swarm around my husband like flies these days."

"As I can imagine. He's a very well connected man. His spheres of interest will intersect with theirs on many levels."

"I note you distance yourself from them. You say *theirs*, not *ours*. You are not *of* them, George is that what you're saying? You are not of *them* any more."

"I'm very much retired, ma'am. Have been for several years now, and as you alluded to, my past association with Nikki, would naturally preclude my being brought back in to the fold."

Yes, she is assessing the threats to her husband, and who might be the one holding the knife. Tamara? Nikki? Me? It's not, I suppose, that she might better judge how to defend him, but more which way she should manoeuvre herself in order to escape collateral damage.

What she does not know, what no one knows, yet – not Tamara, not the man who calls himself Lightfoot, and least of all Malone himself – is that Malone is already ruined. I don't know what she'll do, and care little for it. She has money, and will therefore survive. She's jumpy though. Lightfoot, too... all of which suggests clouds of unease gathering around the magician, on whom they have bet their futures.

I daresay Malone will survive it, at least in some shape or form, but by then he'll be off my back, and no longer a threat to Winona. Yes, much as it amuses me to discover, it was me they needed to worry about all along. I was able to channel the King of Wands just long enough for it to make a difference.

Chapter Forty Four

The Tower, the Hanged Man, and the King of Wands

In which we revisit home, and the tree that fell, before it fell. We experience the euphoria of the heart, and we finally confront our nemesis. So...

Discovering me to be no longer of the service, or a threat, or indeed of even possessing the slightest influence over events, but more simply an invalided and somewhat pathetically long-winded retiree, and cuckold, I am no longer considered a part of the puzzle in Lady Sara's mind. I derive no particular satisfaction from having deceived her, for she was once a lively and a likeable woman, only lately crushed by the circumstance of her position. She departs, abruptly, and I am wondering if I should also be retiring, but the thought of Tamara's bedroom noises still give me pause. Strange as it may sound to you, it is a question of preserving her dignity, at least in my own imagination. It seems I harbour, shall we say, certain unhelpful fantasies, about her.

A young man, in bow tie and waistcoat, bobs in to enquire if I have everything I want, and can he be of service. Indeed he can. He finds me feeling of a sudden expansive, and in celebratory mood.

"Only if you know how one might rustle up a decanter of fine malt."

He mistakes me for someone of importance, nods, dispatches himself at once, returns shortly with said decanter, a crystal tumbler and a caraffe of spring water.

I thank him and pour a generous measure, which I dilute with equal parts of water, and breathe the aroma. But what is this? I've been duped. This is not the promised heaven of a single malt, more like your raggedy arsed "own brand", convenience store whisky. Oh, well, it was a fine show, right up to the reveal, but then such is the nature of the times we are living in.

Metaphors abound, if we can but be receptive to them. It raises a smile all the same, and I drink it down. A couple of these should see me right, and then I will sleep through anything, but not, I hope, to the extent of addling my dreams.

So, off to bed then. The room is blessedly quiet. The lovers must be canoodling elsewhere.

No sooner it seems has my head touched the pillow, than Mr

Williams meets me in the red room. He does not sit, but indicates the door through which he has entered, and bids me follow. There is a strong scent of pipe tobacco. I had forgotten it, or at least that is what the dream is telling me, and through that scent the dream is telling me we are leaving through Mr William's front door, entering his garden on Marsh Avenue, as it was, or still is, in a parallel universe. The pavement is fresh and clean, the road unscarred by diggings. There are privet hedges and cherry trees, and birdsong. Next door, my own house, my father is mowing the front lawn with a pale blue Qualcast push mower. I had quite forgotten that, too – the clattering swish of it keeping rhythm with his movements and his breath, the scent of the felled grasses, the rich green of the lawn...

"Hello, George," he says. He looks young, fresh of face and keen of eye, and not at all surprised to see me. There is the scent, now, of baking. "Mum's making jam buns," he says. "You're just in time."

Mother wears a floral housecoat, her auburn hair held tight in curlers. I had forgotten curlers. I had forgotten too, how beautiful my mother was. They will be off dancing tonight. "Hello, Georgie, love."

"Hi, Mum."

Mr Williams is still with us, but not quite present, somehow. Mother offers me a jam bun, fresh from the oven. It is warm, the pastry crumbling, the jam scalding. Then I am walking, walking the lanes where there are now houses, but in this parallel world of memory, there are none. The leafy lanes are long, and there is no traffic. Durleston wood is fresh, un-littered, the Rye is as clear as a mountain stream. Mr. Williams points out the sapphire blue darting flight of a kingfisher. And then we come to the tree, the tree that fell, except it still stands, its branches fingering sunlight in that old way, and it is a joy to see it whole once more...

A tree falls alone in the forest, it makes no sound,...

Mr Williams speaks. He lays a hand upon his heart. "The joy's all in here, George," he says. "When you know that, you can come back to it any time."

I look up through the branches of the tree, and see the light as it is filtered down, a soft light playing upon my lids. Then it's dawn and, even though I know I am still imprisoned in the grand illusion of the made-up world, I am waking to a feeling of euphoria.

Sometimes dreams are like that.

It's a misty dawn, mysterious, portentous and beautiful. I have dried the outdoor table off with a towel from the en-suite, and brewed coffee. It's Instant only, of course, but I always find it acceptable at that hour. It reminds me of those mornings on the boat when I would brew it, take it back to bed, and lie there, cosy under the blankets, while the day formed in my mind. It's not a bad way of life, on the boat, and I wonder if I shall ever know its simple pleasures again. Alas, I am to be afforded no such luxury today, its course being already set, at least in part by decisions already made, actions already taken.

The Tarot deck survived the scrutiny of security who, after all, were only looking for explosives and guns, not realising they had missed something much more dangerous. When you begin with the cards, as I did long ago, it is safe to assume they act merely as a psychological tool, their random imagery sometimes triggering insights from the unconscious mind, sometimes not. It's later you begin to notice a more pointed approach, one that cannot be random. Nikki explained it as an opening, and not to question it or, even less, to try to explain it. I do not, and have not.

I have drawn The Tower, the Hanged man, and my old friend the King of Wands.

The Tower is an imposing structure, but it has a weakness and is vulnerable to a single strike, in the right place. Then, all who are contained within it are cast into the abyss. The strike, in this case, is brought about by an act of sacrifice, which would be me, hanging myself upside down, and looking unconcerned for my troubles, letting go of something I had been “hanging” on to, but which was actually of no immediate, nor likely future use to me.

The halo round my head suggests it was a noble thing, but I don't know about that. The King of Wands tells me it was at least a sound idea, and if the tumbling tower is anything to go by, the omens are good. I have found the weakness, and have made my strike. It was decided upon that last night I had with Elaine, she snuggled cosily against my chest. Then I made my move over breakfast, with Jacques.

The French windows further along the balcony open, and out steps Malone, from Tamara's room. Already, he is suited in tweed and brogues, hair slicked back, smile oiled, and ready for the day. He is an impressive piece of work, is hale and hearty, and handsome for his years.

"Ah, good morning, George. I hope we didn't keep you awake last night."

He's bragging. Does this mark him as more foolish than I have taken him to be? I doubt it can be so.

"Em... *we*, Sir Josh?"

"Me and Tam. She's a bit of a squealer when she gets going, isn't she?"

Does he assume we share her as a lover? He seeks kinship with me on that basis?

How disgusting.

I suppose we are each of us different in what we take from sex. For me it was always the exquisiteness of it, the act of union being more of a sigh. I surmise Malone, in the throes of lovemaking, is like a pig grubbing for truffles. Tamara I imagine keening for release. She needs to be able to enjoy a party and Champagne, without worrying about what six inch nails might be lurking around the corner.

I deflect him with an innocent smile. "Ah... no. I slept well."

He's alerted by the cards, but they are too far away for him to make the reading out. I draw the deck together, tap them square, sip coffee.

"I'd not taken you for a necromancer," he says.

"Well, as I understand the precise definition of that word, Sir Joshua, a necromancer I am not."

He draws nearer, intrigued. "You know the cards, though?"

"I'm passably familiar with them."

"Read my fortune, then?"

Is he testing me? His own oracles will already have advised him to be cautious regarding me, unless I flatter myself and he does not think anything of me at all. So, be bashful, George: "I don't really believe in that sort of thing. I just use the cards for insight. That's all."

"So what insights do they reveal about me? Go ahead. Flip a card. Humour me. I won't be offended."

I flip the Devil, lay it down for him to see. Ah.. good one! The cards are playful this morning.

"Oh dear," he says, hands held up in mock surrender. "Guilty as charged, old boy."

"Well, I wouldn't worry. It's a card that can apply to any of us from time to time."

He seems satisfied, turns to the sunrise, breathes deeply of the morning. "Beautiful isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is."

"All those dimwits still abed, and missing this. Hard to imagine it's not really there."

Strange thing to say, you think? What does he mean by this? He's sounding me out, I suppose. If I respond as if I understand his meaning, it grants him information which will help to play his hand. Now, I don't want him to be too careful with me, but then it would not do for him to think me an idiot either. In one sense of course, it doesn't matter for, as I have said, the move has already been made, and I need only play for time. As for what he means: all we know of the world is through the instrumentation of the senses, and they only provide a representation for the mind's interpretation. This is what I mean by the tree that falls alone, and how it makes no sound, because there is no one there to hear it. Beyond the senses, there is no sound. But more, beyond the senses, there is no tree, at least not as we think we know it. He and I are agreed on this, if on nothing else.

What to say, then? "Harder still to think the sunrise you see is not the one I see, yet we are both agreed upon its beauty. All of which, in a sense, is quite beautiful, and meaningful, in itself, would you say?"

He seems delighted. I have won his kinship, at least as much as one can win the kinship of one who lurks within that dark triangle whose vertices are the narcissist, the Machiavellian, and the psychopath.

"My dear George! I had taken you for a Philistine. I can see I was wrong. Please forgive me." He sits, his attention full square. "We've met before," he says.

"Yes, I recall. It was that evening I was summoned by Clive Martland."

"Yes... yes. Poor Clive. Clever Clive. I'd always imagined he'd called you in simply to give you a damned good dressing down."

"Which he did."

"But there was another matter he discussed with you, I think."

"Really? You think so?"

"There is another game you are playing, George, and this on behalf of the recently departed Clever Clive. In short, you have something I want."

There! You see? Nikki was right, and my trust in him is vindicated. And just as well, or I might have just ruined a man for nothing. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Sir Joshua."

"Oh, come, George. Life's too short to go beating about the bush. I've searched for her everywhere. A certain barman remembers passing on a phone to her, from a gentleman he describes as an articulate and slightly creepy old fart, a gentleman who matches your description. After that she disappears off the face of the earth. Clive told you to make her vanish, didn't he? That's how he did it. So, tell me, what exactly went on between the two of you that night?"

"Ah now... whilst I am sure of Clive Martland's bona fides – him having been the one who retired me from my former profession, I am less sure of yours, Sir Joshua. Therefore, as for what passed between him and me that night, you know I cannot say."

He thinks my resistance bold, perhaps, though my stance is somewhat weak. It also strikes me as unlikely the young man to whom I gave the phone would describe me in such a derogatory way, or he would not have passed it on. It is the venerable Sir Joshua who means to insult me, then. He insults me further: "A woman is missing, George. Shall I pass on what I know to the police?"

"If, as you say, a woman has been *reported* missing, certainly you must pass on everything you know. Anything less would be a dereliction of your duty as a responsible citizen."

Naturally, he doesn't intend doing this.

"All right. Let me put it another way. You tell me where she is, or you'll leave this house in handcuffs and disappear into whatever black holes your beastly colleagues use these days for awkward little fuckers like you. You've no idea who's at my beck and call, no idea at all."

At last, we meet eye to eye, man to man, but at least he did not threaten to have me killed. Well, not exactly.

"Ah... bless you, Sir Joshua. For a time there I thought we were going to be all day getting around to it. But then again, I had taken you for more of a gentleman, and a magician, of course. I had thought you might try to outwit my turgid mind, which should have been easy for you without having to resort to threats. I had even wondered if you would attempt magic. I believe men of your calibre can hypnotise from a distance, and the subject be entirely unaware.

You might have had all manner of information out of me before I realised what you were up to. If being an awkward little fucker means remaining loyal to the oath I took to uphold the secrets of my profession, and my country, then so be it."

Long winded? Pompous? I suppose so. He's not listening though, is distracted by more figures emerging from Tamara's room: Tamara wears her dressing gown, and looks uncharacteristically submissive between the spectral Lightfoot, and another rather grave looking gentleman. She greets the morning air with a shiver, while the other gentlemen are snugly over-coated. I bid her sit beside me, as if we might thus be better equipped to make a run for it. How? Lord knows. By leaping from the balcony perhaps. I'd probably break my leg, but she looks like she might manage it.

"We've been gazumped, George," she says.

She shivers again, looks more pensive and dishevelled than I am used to seeing her. I remove my jacket, and drape it around her shoulders. I don't know why I make these symbolic protective gestures, since it was not that long ago I was asking her to be sure she was the one who did me in. A melodramatic request, I suppose, all things considered, but one never knows in this business.

Lightfoot turns to Malone. "Sir Joshua, I'm informed this morning, our relationship is no longer a working one. Tamara, as discussed, you will remove yourself and Mr. Swift from this house at once. Whatever benefits your operation has brought, we are grateful, but from now, there will have to be other ways and means."

Tamara grabs what remains of my coffee and gulps it down. "I'll get dressed then. Bye Josh."

She has her escape, and does not look at all disappointed, but Malone, unfamiliar with the etiquette of a weak position, grabs her arm, and pins her to his side. "Wait... sit back down. What are you talking about?"

With a single, sinuous move, Tamara releases herself. It is a move whose follow through results in the attackers' dislocated arm, and then all manner of mischief. Naturally, she restrains herself from the latter, but for a moment, I thought I saw it in her eyes.And who can blame her?

Lightfoot explains: "Sir Joshua, I take it you are unaware you are front page news in the French tabloids, this morning. We are also expecting a request by their authorities we cooperate in their

investigations into the abuse of several young women over a number of years. Naturally this is very embarrassing to us, more so if it should come to light that we have been overly polite in turning a blind eye to similar transgressions on your part here. Ways and means might yet be found to pour oil on these troubled waters, but we would certainly advise against any action that would embarrass us further."

Tamara is beckoning from her room. I take my leave, turn to smoke and vanish from Malone's perplexed gaze. Lightfoot and friend settle in to decide what must be done, consider what magical oils might be concocted and poured.

Tamara, already briefed in full, I presume, has me out of the house in a blur, as if we are eloping. The car is waiting. Machine guns at the gate are lowered to let us pass. She glances through the rear windscreen to watch, as we exit. And later as we are speeding north:

"Well, he's ruined, George."

"Ruined?"

"Nothing to do with me. I've been more than careful to polish his ego."

"I take it these are old sins catching up with him, then?"

"You could say so. But he's been so well protected. Still, we did rather overlook what the Frenchies might have on him. They've been sitting on all this stuff, some of it for decades. Why on earth would they choose to leak it now? Anyway, I suppose it solves your little problem. He's not exactly going to be running after whats-her-name, now, is he? If indeed that was the case, which I still doubt, by the way."

"Winona, you mean? You're probably right about that. It sounds as if he'd be a fool to try it anyway, now. Are you disappointed? You clearly put a lot of - em - personal effort into cultivating him."

"Oh, you know? Can't say I'm bothered, George, actually. I'm ready to lie on a beach somewhere, if I'm honest. Get some sun. You?"

"Well, I'm certainly not disappointed to be missing out on the rest of that conference. Last night's dinner was enough for me. So, Tamara, we come to the big question, and much as it has been a pleasure knowing you – and I think I mean that sincerely – are we done, now?"

She sighs. "Sadly, yes, George. It looks like we're done." And

then: "A pity, you're awfully fun to be with."

"I take it you're being ironic?"

"Not at all, darling. What I like about you is you're so deliciously other-worldly, and I enjoy trying to see if I can shock you back into this one before you disappear into the never-never."

"I've noticed. Listen, they'll probably put you on ice for a bit, now. You realise that, don't you? Guilty by association with the Devil, and all that, but you mustn't take it personally."

"Thank you, George. I'm well aware of what lies ahead of me, now, Some sideways move, perhaps – oh Lord – a desk, if I'm lucky. And if I'm not, out to grass for a bit. But don't get too comfortable. I may look you up some day."

"Not if I see you coming."

"Oh, I assure you. You won't see me coming."

Chapter Forty Five

The Hornblower

In which the watch is set. So...

Tamara was right. Malone is ruined, even more so than I had intended. The British tabloids broke ranks, not wishing to be outdone by their Gallic cousins, and the sober voices of governance could no longer restrain them. Either that, or the likes of Lightfoot could no longer have cared less. Much of what was written about him was fantasy, of course – the debauched goings on of the great and the good, that sort of thing. Abuse of young women, and Satanism to boot, all of it spun up for crass titillation.

They had some fun inventing the rituals Malone was supposed to have got up to, while taking none of it at all seriously, and therefore missing the point entirely, which they generally seem to do either by accident or design. But the point they did get, and which he got, was it would be impossible for him to move in the same circles again without years of concertedly convoluted PR cleaning up his image.

Ironically, it was only myself and Nikki who paid him the respect that was his due, I mean as a magician, while disapproving of his methods and his morals, of course. The publicity encouraged several women to come forward with their own me-too complaints. There are rumours of an investigation, others of stonewalling by those few still either loyal, or obligated to him. The effect was the same, so far as I'm concerned. Whatever interest he had in Winona was eclipsed. He slipped abroad, early in the New Year, to avoid the mess. Lady Sara is filing for divorce.

To answer Tamara's question as regards timing, and perhaps yours also, the French were obviously persuaded to move against a person they had no particular use or regard for, in exchange for something of greater value. There is no shortage of examples regarding what this might have been. But just suppose they got hold of compromising material on a man who might yet become the next British PM? That would be a serious matter, for then the French would own him. Naturally, I use this only as an example.

Sometimes these things just happen.

So now... town square, Ripon. Early spring. Winona and I have over-wintered on the boat, and used the return of the light, of the

sun to bring her up to moorings at the marina. It is journey's end, so to speak, and in more ways than one. The months have been cold and damp, and dreary-dark, the boat smelling of paraffin for want of something else to light her with. There have been storms, too, that have rocked the boat, had her tugging playfully at her moorings. On land, buildings have had roofs torn from them, and forests have been felled. It was quite the adventure, but we are here now, and there is a sense of achievement beyond anything you might imagine for such an understated voyage, along England's inland waterways.

We have spent the time writing poetry, and discussing metaphysics, all of which was pleasantly rewarding. During the worst of the winter, I had been of the opinion I wanted a house, with a stout front door, and a conservatory to trap the sunshine in the summer months. But when the roofs started coming off, I realised a small boat, barely six feet above the waterline and some lengths of stout mooring rope would suit me perfectly well. After all, what bits and bobs a man cannot fit inside an old sea chest is more than he needs anyway.

Right now I am sitting, watching Winona as she crosses the square towards me with two hot chocolates in cardboard cups. And I am watching the Hornblower in his long beige coat, and a tricorn hat, striding from the town hall. Then there is a small gathering of tourists come to see the ritual.

"I would never have believe it, George," she says, as she settles in beside me. We watch the blowing of the horn, once into each corner of the square. The watch is thus set, and we might all sleep safely tonight. The clock strikes nine p.m.

"Of course he doesn't really keep everyone safe, does he?" she says.

"Sadly not, but it's a nice thought. And there is comfort in the continuity of a long unbroken tradition – I mean in a world where everything else seems to be falling apart – that something as irrational as this is still considered worth the effort."

The town is filled with woodsmoke, the air thick with it, and to a degree that has inflamed my sinuses, and is causing a tightness in my chest. It's like this everywhere now. The latest wheeze is for gangs to go raiding the remote coniferous plantations at dead of night where they cut down trees. Then they sell the unseasoned wood on the black market, and that's what's going up the chimneys

to keep Albion warm. Fireplaces, bricked up in the long ago, are being unbricked, and pressed back in to use. There have been fisticuffs over bits of driftwood on the beaches, and the normal quiet of rural England is torn with the manic roar of chain saws as we commit everything that is combustible to the flames.

"That thing you were worried about," she asks. "You're still thinking it's all right, now?"

"I am, yes. You can look to your future, Winona." We touch hot chocolates by way of a toast.

"And to yours, George. What'll we do next?"

I had made to deliberately offer the opening of a gap between us there. Did you notice? *Your* future, Winona, I'd said. And she closes it back up at once by asking what *we* shall do next?

"Well, what would you like to do?"

"Oh, spend a little time here, like we said. Visit the cathedral, see Fountain's Abbey, and Studley Royal, and Old Mother Shipton's place."

"And then?"

"Then turn the boat around, and sail her all the way to Llangollen?"

"Seriously? Why Llangollen?"

"I don't know. I like the sound of it, the feel of it on the tongue. Unless you mean to sell the boat... we never did get around to discussing what comes after Ripon."

"I don't intend selling it. Unless it's for a slightly bigger one. No, the Lady Lucy is your home for as long as you want it, and you are its captain. Therefore, Llangollen it is."

"Okay, but stop paying me, all right? So... dare I ask, what did you have to do? I mean to make everything all right."

"Well, have you never thought I might have made the whole thing up, so you would look after my boat, and keep an old man company?"

"No, I've never thought that, but then I never worked in your world, or I might have thought it, I suppose. And judging by your evasive answer, I'm assuming it's not something you want to talk about. Or can talk about."

"Well, least said, and all that. But rest assured, you're perfectly safe to go and live a normal life now."

"As if that was ever going to happen to someone like me." She pulls back her hair to reveal her ears for emphasis, pokes out her

tongue.

"Then lets say you are free to make your way as you see best."

"And you?"

"I'm already there, I think. It doesn't matter what I do, now. I'll be happy either way, though I have a hankering for a beach-front bar, somewhere hot. I see myself in a comfortably crumpled Panama suit, and hat, like a character from a Graham Green novel. Or drinking hot chocolates on an evening like this, or tucked up in my bunk, reading this old book I found in the charity shop today, or threading the Lady Lucy up and down a flight of locks. However..."

"Oh?"

"There is just one thing troubling me. You're unlikely to find yourself a nice young man, while you're sailing the canal network with me."

"Don't worry about that," she says. And then, by way of changing the subject: "Looks like a nice pub across the square, there. You fancy a drink?"

And by way of bringing the subject back on course: "Good idea. We might find you a nice young man in there."

"Or you a nice lady."

"My courting days are over."

"Well you know my feelings on that subject."

"I do, and you may be right. But if anyone asks in the pub, I'm your father, right?"

"That, George, will be my pleasure. But more than anything, you are, and always will be my Sifu, right?"

"If you insist. But honestly, Winona, I've learned more from you in the short time I've known you than I have in decades."

"Well, on that subject, there's another thing I wanted to ask you? It's about the Secret. We both know The Secret. But how far would you say you are along the road towards actually believing it to be true?"

"Ah, that old thing... well..."

Epilogue

In which we meet a redhead on a Grecian Isle. So...

Did I tell you Winona's hair is red? I can't remember, but I'm sure I did. Red hair, shockingly white skin, like there is no blood in her. Oh, and pointy ears. Anyway, that's not the redhead I'm talking about. Winona is threading the Lady Lucy south, now. She was in Skipton, when I last heard from her, a week ago. Meanwhile, I'm here in Matala, on the island of Crete. Actually, I'm corrupting that opening line from a Joni Mitchell song. She was here in '69 and, for a short time, joined with the hippies who'd taken over the caves at the north end of the beach. It was a redneck, she sang of, not a redhead, a mean old daddy called Carey, who gave her back her smile.

It sounds like I'm rambling, but there's a point, and I'm coming to it.

The hippies were cleared out by the cops, sometime in the seventies. The vibe died, like it died everywhere, got itself neutered by assimilation into popular culture. Too much weed. Too much nudity. Too much free love. And someone has to dig coal. Now all you get are tourists, like me, among us the Brits who come simply to warm our bones.

It's not really my sort of place. Too big now, too touristy, too hot. When the hippies came there was nothing. They were dropping out, looking for something "other" in its emptiness, than what they saw the world becoming. When they left, Matala, and all the other places like it became the very thing they despised, and were escaping.

For those old enough to remember, the hippies came out of the Beat generation. The Beats were less conspicuous, but no less subversive in their views. My generation came out of the hippies, though in some ways we resemble Beats for our lack of fanfare. But we're also the deep cover generation. We understand the nature of Maya, understand also you've got to pay it lip service, so its agents don't crush you, while secretly carrying on your own way, which means mostly inside your own head, tunnelling towards the same revelation the Beats and the Hippies sought, the same secret.

No one talks about us, and that's the way we like it. Nor does anyone fear us overturning the world and corrupting a generation,

because that's not our aim either. Our aim is much more self-centred. But if we can evolve a little ourselves, it makes it easier for others to evolve too, perhaps even unconsciously, along similar lines. This will be in the generations that follow us, generations like Winona's. She's way ahead of me already, yet only half my age.

There's a saying how we're first called to the path by a sense of something other, and we pursue it by whatever means comes to hand. We go east, we go west, but either way we go deep, and personal. We know we've hit the mother lode when we realise there is no other, that we are *it*, and at the same time as being it, we solve the old Solipsistic paradox, that if I'm it, then who the hell are you? And it's really very simple. Neither you nor I dream the universe into being, my friend. It's the universe dreaming us. Yet, all the same, no matter how many times someone tells you that, you don't really know it, until you *know it*.

So, anyway, here I am, at this beach-front bar looking like that comfortably crumpled Panama-suited Graham Greene character I joked to Winona about, or as I've just realised with something of a shock of recognition, like Mr. Williams. I'll be shipping out in the morning, catching a boat to the Dodecanese, and hopefully a bit more space. The people here are friendly enough, but, like all tourist honeypots, if you're not spending in the hostelries, they'd rather you weren't here.

To answer Winona's question, then. Do I believe? No, of course I don't, which might seem to you a disappointing conclusion to a hundred thousand words in search of that belief, a journey that began with a falling tree and a lot of guff about how it made no sound. But there's more.

I do know the secret. You know it too, because I've told it you. And it isn't actually that I don't believe in it. It's more I have achieved a kind of peace, where I don't care if the secret is true or not. It doesn't matter, you see? I don't need to defend it in heated debate. The sun rises, the sun sets, and there are always plenty of pretty girls on the beach. The geese, flying low over the lake do not intend to cast their reflection, and the water has no mind to retain their image. Makes sense? No, of course it doesn't. Nothing we say makes sense. It's only when we're quiet do we begin to approach a deeper kind of knowing.

So anyway, this red-head. At first, I'm confused because she used to be blonde. She comes over to my table, lowers her sunglasses.

"Hello, George," she says.

She does not seem surprised, at least not half as surprised as I am to see her. It is not that I do not recognise her. Of course I do, notwithstanding the colour of her hair, and the fact she looks like she's been bronzing her skin all summer.

"Amelia?"

A nod. "You remembered my real name. How sweet of you."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Are you kidding? Dressed like that? I might have been in Turkey and still heard about it. I did promise to look you up. How's what's-her-name?"

"Winona. Kind of you to ask. She's well, thank you."

She sits, catches the eye of the waiter, he comes running, she orders in Greek, lights a cigarette. "Mind if I keep you company for a bit?"

"Do I have a choice?" Though in fact, I find I don't mind at all.

A smile, a sigh. I sense a contentment about her. And then: "So, George," she says, "I was thinking,..."

ENDS